How near you stand to me by Boudoir_Writer

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)
Genre: 80s sexism, Alternate Universe - Dystopia, Angst and Hurt/Comfort, Anxiety, Attempted Rape/Non-Con, Billy Hargrove Needs a Hug, Billy/OFC casual sex, Bisexual Steve Harrington, Brainwashing, Canon compliant up to Season 2, Canon-Typical Violence, Child Neglect, Consent Issues, Dissociation, Dom/sub Undertones, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Enemies to Friends to Lovers, Eventual Happy Ending, F/M, Face Slapping, Gay Billy Hargrove, Getting to Know Each Other, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Implied/Referenced Rape/Non-con, Indentured Servitude, Internalized Homophobia, Kissing, Like Whoa, M/M, Masturbation, Mention of eating disorder, Miscommunication, Neil Hargrove Being an Asshole, Non-Consensual Drug Use, Other Additional Tags to Be Added, Panic Attacks, Rough Oral Sex, Self-Esteem Issues, Self-Hatred, Slavery, Steve Harrington Is a Mess, Steve Harrington Needs a Hug, Steve Harrington's Father Being an Asshole, Steve/OMC casual sex, UST, Underage Drinking, eventually, it's not THAT kind of fic, mentions of cigarette burns, mentions of spanking, no ugly business between Steve and Billy, shock collar, they hug each other
Language: English
Characters: Dustin Henderson, Joyce Byers, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers
Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler
Status: In-Progress
Published: 2021-02-02
Updated: 2021-05-10
Packaged: 2022-04-01 00:54:55
Rating: Explicit
Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Chapters: 5
Words: 35,032
Publisher: archiveofourown.org
Summary:

“It’s a big change and it’s not easy to adjust, but it will get better, you’ll see. You just need to give it time and be good. You want to be

good, don’t you, Billy?”
Billy clenches his jaw so hard he could break a tooth, swallows. The shock collar they snapped around his neck as soon as they processed him catches against the flutter of his throat. He swallows again, against the metallic taste of the drugs flooding his mouth, against shame and rage. He feels like screaming, like sleeping, like crying.
He closes his eyes.
What was the question again?
It doesn’t matter. He’s smart, he knows that the answer is yes, ma’m. It always is.

Or: The indentured!Billy fic no one asked for.

1. Chapter 1

Notes for the Chapter:

This has been sitting in my docs for a year now. Time to let it go.
It's 50k so it will be around 10 long chapters. My first multichaptered piece - wow.
POV will alternate between Billy and Steve.
Please note this is NOT a fic where Steve takes advantage of Billy's status. The opposite, really: I wrote this to explore the repercussions of being in control of someone else's physical and mental well being. Also, the conflict between personal beliefs/ societal pressure. Because these are my kinks, okay? So in a way this is very self-indulgent - though, there's like, no sex in it. YES, I know, WTF? Can't really explain! I was reading about the Stanford Prison experiment/Milgram shock experiment, the US indentured servitude system, then thought about Alex' rehab in A clockwork orange, and BAM, this happened. Sorry, not sorry.
the whole fic revolves around consent and lack of thereof so problematic stuff ahead, folks. Tags will be added as we progress so CHECK THEM. And if I missed any, let me know. I will also add specific trigger notes at the end of each chapter.
Title: Hand in glove, The Smiths
Also, unbeated, sorry.

Hand in glove

We can go wherever we please

And everything depends upon

How near you stand to me

Billy

They take him on a Friday. He's not prepared and the thing is, he should have been: Neil's good mood should have given it away. And if not that, it's that when the doorbell rings, his father sets down his beer on the battered coffee table and says: "I'll get this."

Susan and Maxine are visiting Susan's sister for Christmas. Neil said he had work and Billy, well, Billy wasn't invited, really.

So it's just him and his old man and Billy is on his best behaviour, keeping out of the way, out of trouble. He doesn't need a repeat of the night he came back from Byers' without his car and without Maxine. He pissed blood for a week after that, and the last time that happened they had to move to this shithole of a town.

He hears the doorbell and he's about to set down the plate he's been washing when his dad says, I'll get it.

Billy doesn't question the solicitude. He should have.

He hears muffled voices in the living room, and he turns to look and that's when he sees them.

He knows who they are: they show up to Hawkins High every quarter, like clockwork, to give difficult kids a talk. Billy's had his fair share of *talks.* But one thing is being threatened with a tour of the System if he doesn't behave, if he's not respectful, *responsible* , one thing is knowing that this is it, this is when they come for him.

The plate slips from Billy's grip and goes in pieces on the ugly vinyl that Susan has been begging Neil to replace since they moved in. Billy thinks of another kitchen, another plate, of *Harrington* , of all people, and then, before he can plant his feet, they are on him.

Neil is back on the sofa, back to his game and his beer, back at pretending Billy doesn't even exist as they drag him off, arms wrenched behind his back and that it, his old man sitting on the sofa watching the stupid game and drinking his fucking beer as if he hadn't just ended Billy's life, jolts him into motion.

He headbutts the guy right behind him, hears him curse, and kicks into a knee. “Let me go,” he shouts, wrenches an arm free, swings, hits. “Let me go!”

But they don’t let go. There’s the jolt of electricity in his side and his body seized up and Billy thinks, idly, so that’s how it feels being tazed.

Then the sting of a needle in his neck, jostling another memory of that night and maybe that’s why this, why now. Because he fucked up, again.

By the time they reach the van he can’t keep upright, can’t think straight, can’t even despair.

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“Do you know why you are here?”

Billy can’t stop twitching in his seat. He lost count of how many times the guards have zapped him with those fucking cattle prods today.

Because he talked back.

Because he looked someone in the eyes.

Because he didn’t kneel fast enough.

Because he breathed. You name it.

God, his old man could learn a thing or two from these assholes. Now that’s an entertaining thought. Billy keeps his mouth shut as his assigned *counselor* drones on, and moves closer. It’s not a real question, like the counselor is not a real counselor. But they do like to play pretend. And Billy has to play too. Or else. Billy trains his eyes on a spot on the floor. It looks like a spilled chocolate milkshake. Or dried blood. He breathes through his nose, in and out,

smells sanitizer and iron. Blood then. Of course it is.

He's strapped down in the too hard chair and there's a guard behind him, gaze on the exposed nape of his neck like a clamp. His mullet is gone. They shaved it off during processing and they had to sedate him again because he would have snapped his own wrists the way he was pulling at the straps holding him down. When he woke up he thought he'd find that they had shaved it all off, but they didn't. They left a mop of curls on the top of his head, long enough to grab on when he's being *contrary* . The haircut makes his ears stick out and his face an easy target, naked and vulnerable. It makes him sick.

"This must be quite distressing," the counselor coos while she rubs disinfectant in the crook of his arm. Billy is tense, always so fucking tense, biceps bulging and tendons cording beneath his skin, but the needle is sharp and finds the vein like always. The IV starts dripping and Billy knows it's only a matter of minutes before he starts floating.

"But you are a smart guy, Billy, aren't you?" She's saying. "And you'll figure it all out soon enough."

Oh, Billy has this figured out all right. He *is* smart, had to be to survive life with Neil. He knows what this is: it's stick and carrots. Good cops, bad cops. Mindfuckery. Still, it throws him. The beatings he can deal with, he's a fucking pro if there ever was such a contest. But the drugs and the talks and the gentle grounding touches, and isn't it easier to just do as you are told, Billy? Doesn't it feel just right? The only things anchoring him down as he floats further and further away - those he doesn't know what to do with. They make him doubt himself, want to give in, what to be *good* , whatever that means.

Pussy , his old man whispers in his ear. *Because you are a fucking pussy.*

"It's a big change and it's not easy to adjust, but it will get better, you'll see. You just need to give it time and be good. You want to be good, don't you, Billy?"

Billy clenches his jaw so hard he could break a tooth, swallows. The shock collar they snapped around his neck as soon as they processed

him catches against the flutter of his throat. He swallows again, against the metallic taste of the drugs flooding his mouth, against shame and rage. He feels like screaming, like sleeping, like crying.

He closes his eyes.

What was the question again?

It doesn't matter. He's smart, he knows that the answer is *yes, ma'm* . It always is.

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Billy thinks he recognizes the voice, pissed off and disbelieving. It pulls at him like a hook in the guts. A quick glance up and there's Harrington, arms crossed over his chest, hair sticking in all directions, as if he's just woken up.

"Hargrove?"

Yeah, it's me, don't cream your pants.

Billy swallows an ugly, unhinged laugh, because Christ, the *irony* : of course Harrington, of all people, would buy him.

He brings his eyes back to the ground, to Harrington's naked feet on polished wood, before the counselor delivering him like an oversized package can take notice of his wandering eyes, the curl of his lips, and decide he needs more training.

"If we could do this inside, Mr Harrington," the counselor suggests in that placating voice Billy has become intimately familiar with. "It's quite chilly out here, isn't it?"

Chilly. Billy has to suppress a snort: he's wearing grey cotton scrubs and plimsolls and his toes have gone numb.

He doesn't dare take another look at Harrington, but hears him huff

and shuffle off and then the counselor is saying “Billy” and he follows, like the good little dog they turned him into.

What else can he do, but play into this fucked up game?

“Mr Harrington’s instructions were very specific, you see, someone around your age, with similar interests. Billy here, is a perfect match. Everything you could possibly want in a companion.”

Harringont huffs, incredulous. “ *Companion* ? Haha, very funny, Hargrove.”

Billy licks his lips, but doesn’t say anything. Doesn’t even look up and that must clue Harrington in, dense as he is.

A tense silence occupies the next minute, then Harrington says: “This is a joke, right?”

The counselor is quick to reassure Harrington. “I assure you this is no joke, Mr Harrington. You must be familiar with the System.”

“I - yes?” Harrington’s voice is going up, bordering on shrill now. He’s uncomfortable, like most people mentioning the System. It’s not a subject for polite conversation. After all the System has been devised for kids like Billy - not pretty boys with a trust fund. “But I mean, that’s - .”

“Billy here just completed his training and he’s a perfect match for a request we received back in November,” she cuts in. “As you can imagine we have long waiting lists, so it’s quite fortunate that we could find you a match in such a short time. If you would like to inspect him?”

Harrigton has gone awfully quiet and the click of the leash being unattached from Billy’s collar is loud in the room.

“Inspect him?” Harrignton squeaks but Harrington has made it pretty clear he doesn’t want anything to do with Billy, and that means the counselor is still calling the shots.

Billy's fingers are at the hem of his t-shirt before the counselor has to prompt him. He takes it off, and it barely catches on the collar. He hears Harrington suck in a breath. He goes for his pants next.

"Whoa, whoa, okay, *that's enough* ," Harrington snaps. There's that uncomfortable laugh again, but also something else, something like authority, like *get out* . Billy pauses, unsure, caught between the counselor and Harrington.

"You heard Mr Harrington." The counselor waves her hand off, placating, and Billy drops his hands from his waistband and waits.

"Well, this is disappointing," she clicks her tongue. "But if you are absolutely sure that you do not want Billy -"

Billy should be relieved, really, because Harrington hates his guts and if roles were reversed, oh, boy. And yet, yet, he'd rather take his chances with Harrington because while he knows that Harrington hates his guts, he also knows that Harrington is Hawkins resident patron of lost causes and Billy is the epitome of fucking lost causes.

"I'm sure we can find someone else willing to take him," she shrugs and moves to click the leash back on. Billy wishes she would let him put his shirt back on, his nipples are going to fall off if he goes outside like this, but he knows better than to ask.

"Wait," Harrington says. "Just - just wait a minute, all right? This - you can't just - I need to *think* ."

And Billy needs to bite his lips to stop himself from snorting. Harrington sounds so serious and shit, it's ridiculous.

But then Harrignton gives a long-suffering sigh. "Fuck it," Billy hear him murmurs, and he sounds weary and displeased but there's that steel again underneath it all, like Harrington has made up his mind, has decided and he's none to pleased that he had to in the first place.

Uh-oh.

"I -" Harrington clears his throat. "I'll take him," he says and Billy's heart slams against his ribcage once, twice, as if trying to get out or knock itself unconscious and what the fuck? Billy thinks. He's not

scared of Harrington, is he?

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After that is paperwork. And after paperwork Harrington is fitted with the wristband that can activate Billy's collar, shock him all the way from reprimand, to compliance, to *oh god, please* .

Throughout it all Billy stands, shirtless, eyes on the floor. His legs have started to feel heavy a while back and he wiggles his toes in his plimsolls to stave off cramps. At least he's not cold, Harrington's central heating is pretty sweet.

Then finally, fucking finally, the counselor hands the leash to Harrington and leaves with a *be a good boy, Billy, make us proud* and fuck, Billy would be in hysterics if he didn't know better.

He breathes through his nose and gives a short nod, listens to her heels click clacking away. Then she's off and it's just him and Harrington and all that drowning silence.

"You can drop the act, now," Harrington grumbles and Billy blinks. "I can fucking see the wheels turning in your head, Hargrove."

And Billy is tempted, he is. But Harrington is not his friend, Harrington *owns him,* like the plush rug under Billy's feet, or the potted plant in the corner. His owner, leash in one hand, shock button on his wrist, that's what Harrington is, and Billy knew before but now, now it's *real* and just like that there's something coiling in his chest, tighter and tighter, and he needs to tell himself to breathe, breathe you stupid shit.

He is very much aware than short of killing him or maiming him, Harrington can do anything he wants to him, anything at all. And that leaves a lot of things on the table. And yet that's not what worries Billy, not really. He can take a lot. He has taken a lot. No. What scares Billy shitless is that Harrington can complain about him. That means a mark on his record. That means that they could extend

his indenture. His old man was only able to sign him off for the six months separating Billy from adulthood, from turning eighteen. But if he fucks up, they can find reasons to keep him - indefinitely. He would never get out of the System, he would never be *free* .

So Billy breathes and keeps his mouth shut and his eyes on the floor.

Apparently that's the wrong thing to do because next thing he knows Harrington is in his face. Billy can't help it, he tenses up, fingers curling into fists at his sides. His body is primed to fight back, his training is overriding the instinct, and it's like being pulled in opposite directions and he'll snap -

"Look at me," Harrington says, quiet, breath ghosting on Billy's cheek, and the skin there is used to slaps and punches that Billy is thrown for a moment until it clocks that it's an order, Harrington gave him an order so Billy does what he's supposed to do, what good boys do, he obeys - rips his eyes off the floor and meets Harrington's gaze. He'll never know what Harrington sees, but it must be bad because those stupid big eyes of his fill with something like pity and Billy can't - he looks away.

Shit.

Harrington gave him one order, one fucking order, and Billy fucked up already. He feels sick, jittery with worry, like realising his dad is back home and in a mood. He forces himself to meet Harrington's gaze again, it's the least he can do, and it's harder than picking himself up off the floor after his old man had a go at him.

But Harrington is not looking at him anymore. He's chewing on his lips, a frown etching a deep line between his eyebrows.

Shit. Phantom metallic taste of the drugs is in his mouth and panic hits him like a tall, dark wave. *Shit, shit, shit*

I am sorry, I can do better, I will, I swear - The words are an avalanche from his brain to his tongue, about to tumble out but that's when Harrignton takes a step back. Billy swallows, waits.

"Fuck," Harrignton breathes, runs a hand through his hair, rubs at his

face. “Fuck, I can’t even -”

When he looks up again he seems surprised to find that Billy is still there. Harrington shakes his head.

“Stay right there, I need to -” he says, but never finishes the sentence, walks off muttering, slams a door.

Billy stays. He’s still shirtless and has been standing for the last couple of hours. But Harrington told him to stay so he grits his teeth and *stays* .

Steve

Okay, okay, *okay* .

Steve leans back against the door of the kitchen. It’s a sturdy door, all solid wood, none of that flimsy cheap stuff from the local warehouse. His mum had it handmade somewhere in *Norway* .

It’s enough to hold him upright but not enough to make him forget Hargrove’s presence in his living room.

Jesus *fuck* . Hargrove.

Steve has Hargrove in his living room and Hargrove has a collar around his neck. Steve spent Friday night ransacking his dad's liquor cabinet, on a quest to blissful unconsciousness, and maybe, just maybe, *sleep* , and it’s too early and he’s too hungover to deal with this shitshow.

But then he suspects there’s no level of sobriety that would help him deal with this.

He puts on the coffee machine because that fucking bitch, selling him Hargrove like a - a *vacuum cleaner* , she didn’t even gave him time to get a cup, get his sad, pathetic excuse for a brain the kickstart it desperately needs to operate at his usual subnormal level.

The coffee machine gurgles and Steve rubs at his mouth, his stupid mouth always running off faster than his brain - getting him in trouble, getting him *Hargrove* .

Fuck fuck *fuck* .

He pours some coffee, it splash off the counter, scalds his hand. The pain is good. He pain centers him.

He takes a too hot sip, breathes. Hargrove's *eyes* .

God, he needs help.

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"You did *what* ?"

Steve bites at his thumbnail, rips a bit off. A drop of blood wells up, it stings. Steve curses under his breath, moves the phone to his other shoulder, presses down on the nail until it goes white.

"I know! I know but look, you didn't see - she said they would give him to someone else and you didn't see what she - I mean the way she was talking about it, about *him,* like he's -" he swallows, can't find the words. Was never good with words on a good day, and today is anything but. He lets his head thud against the wall, next to the phone. Nancy is lecturing him on thinking things through and being responsible and - Steve's head his pounding. Beyond that there's the faint buzz of the fridge. Nothing from the living room. Maybe Hargrove ran away.

He can't run away, he has to stay in range of the wristband or the collar will go off, the counselor's no nonsense voice supplies.

And it all boils down to that, really.

"Nancy," he blurts, rubbing at tender brown. "Listen. Just - *listen* . They put a fucking shock

collar on him, okay?" It's brutal. It's the truth. "And I - I couldn't."

Nancy is quiet for a long time and Steve just listens to her breathe, listens to his heart hammering away in his too tight chest.

Then Nancy huffs, "All right." And she sounds cowed and when is Nancy Wheeler ever cowed? Steve grimaces.

"We'll be there in thirty minutes," she says and there's the rustle of clothes, maybe bedsheets, and a thud and a muffled groan - Jonathan, Steve figures - in the background. It would have stung, once. "Thirty minutes, Steve. Try not to do anything stupid in the meantime, okay?"

And all right, Steve is stupid but he should manage thirty minutes shouldn't he?

Nancy hangs up and Steve stares at the phone for a minute, just listening to the tone as if a message from God. Eventually shakes himself into motion. Twenty-nine minutes to go. Right.

What next?

More coffee. He refills his mug then takes another and fills that too.

Then he takes a deep breath, straightens his shoulders and goes back to the living room. He finds Hargrove where he left him. *Exactly* where he left him. He doesn't even turn around, but he must hear Steve approaching because his shoulders go tense. It's easy to see, he's still shirtless.

Steve sets the mugs down on the coffee table and brings himself into Hargrove's line of sight - if Hargrove looked up from the floor, that's it. Which he doesn't.

It's fucking *weird* .

It makes Steve realise that he's used to having Hargrove's eyes on him all the time. True, he kept a safe distance from Steve since Max threatened to nail his balls, but that didn't put a stop to the staring. As sure as Steve failing his History class, whenever Hargrove is around Steve only has to raise his gaze to meet that unnerving glare.

But now, now Steve can only see Hargrove's eyelashes, thick and curly like a girl, the blue of his eyes like the glimpse of a fantastic beast through fairytale woods.

"Man, aren't you cold? Put that shirt back on," Steve blurts and gapes when Hargrove complies not a second later, without a leer, without even a smirk. Then he stands there, waiting. *Of course.* Steve kicks himself mentally and scrubs at his face.

"Sit down."

And Hargrove sits down - no, *kneels* - right there, on the rug. There's something like relief on his face but Steve is - he doesn't know what he is, horrified, embarrassed, *scared* . In any case it's too late for Steve's next words to stop tumbling out of his stupid mouth. "No, man, what are you doing, get up."

And Hargrove gets up again, again without a word, the only outward change a pinch to his mouth, like discomfort. Steve stares and kicks himself mentally once more, with feeling.

"I mean - I mean on the couch. Come sit on the couch. Please?"

Hargrove stalls for a second then walks over to the couch, stiffly, sits down. His back straight, he doesn't sprawl or lay back, but what can Steve do? Order him to relax? Yeah, that's going to go down well.

"Uh, I - there's coffee," he says instead.

Hargrove's eyes flick to the steaming mug, but he doesn't move to take it.

"For you. You can drink it, if you want to?"

Hargrove licks his lips, works his jaw. His hands twitch in his lap, his left looks naked without his ring.

"Please," he says.

It's a quiet, low rumble, it's the first word out of Hargrove's mouth since this whole surreal day started - Hargrove who never *ever* shuts up, who is as loud as they fucking come, who Steve didn't think

capable of ever says words like please - and Steve feels his cheeks heat and he doesn't know why. He clears his throat. "Sure, go ahead. You want cream? Sugar? Sorry, should have asked. How about cookies? I should have some left, unless Dustin got to my secret stash -" He's babbling, waving his hands.

Hargrove instead has his hands around the cup, his nose in it, his eyes closed. Steve lets his commentary fizzle out and die like cheap fireworks, and watches as Hargrove takes a sip, swallows, and something Steve can't quite name spreads over his face, makes it soft, changes it to the point that Steve struggles to recognize him.

Then he opens his eyes and meets Steve's gaze. It's an accident and not a moment later Hargrove goes back to staring at anything but Steve.

"Hey, it's all right," Steve blurts. "I mean, I know I'm not much to look at but you can - you can look at me, or - or not! Whatever you want."

When he told Hargrove to look at him earlier, he could not believe what the woman had said, about Billy being *trained* , he was not prepared for the reality of it. He expected one of their staring contests, the hate and the blaze and the friction. Instead Hargrove's eyes were - *wrong* . Muted and still, shallow puddles where churning oceans used to be.

Steve didn't think he could know the difference, miss the threat and the thrill of drowning, of being swept away.

Now he knows better, now he's prepared.

Hargrove's eyes flick towards his, down-up, and this time Steve meets his gaze with no expectations. When Hargrove doesn't immediately look away, Steve dares to search for something, a flicker of annoyance, a spark of a challenge, anything that he can recognize as Billy Hargrove.

What he finds there shakes him to the core. As a secret threatening to spill, a spot of rot on the verge of spreading, he finds a chilling, deeply embedded shard of fear in Hargrove's eyes.

Steve should be glad. Hargrove is an asshole, a bully, unpleasant at his best, unhinged at his worst. He's dangerous, Steve of all people should know, and he should be glad, fucking ecstatic, really, that they reduced Hargrove to this quiet, unthreathening shell.

Then why does it sicken him, like an unplanned stroll in the upside down?

"I'll get those cookies," Steve hurries to say, because he can't - he needs to leave, *now* .

Billy

Why Harrington keeps asking him to look him in the eyes only to run away, that's besides Billy. But hey, it's been an hour and he hasn't been zapped, or punched in the face, or made to suck cock.

Not that anyone mentioned that last part, but Billy is not stupid, Billy knows they spent way too much time ensuring he wouldn't bite. He can't imagine that being an essential skill in case an owner may want to do what? Feed him by hand?

It makes more sense that Harrington may want to use him that way, instead. It's much more intimate than being a punching bag, because Billy would have to do something. Humiliation feeds on intimacy. That's why his old man was so good at humiliating him. Because he knew Billy.

Faggot.

Harrington doesn't know Billy, but Billy is well acquainted with what power does to people. And Harrington has more reasons than most to want to use that power to teach Billy a lesson or two. Billy can't really blame the guy, he would do the same if positions were reversed.

It's just a question of time, Billy thinks, time to realize that there are no consequences, that if Harrington decides to wield that power to

slap Billy around or bend him over, who is going to tell him off? Certainly not Billy, with a shock collar around is neck and a lifetime in the System to look forward to if he breathes wrong.

But it's been an hour and Billy is sitting down on a couch and has had coffee, and he might even get a cookie - a *cookie* , for fuck's sake, and of course he remembers the taste, they only kept him two weeks after all, but in those two weeks he's been broken and twisted and put back together in ways he didn't think possible, in ways that at times like this make him doubt he is still himself, the way his skin feels too tight, his thoughts unfamiliar.

Cookies. How domestic is that?

Not that he would mind having one, he hasn't had one since they took him. He hasn't had coffee either or, god forbid, a smoke. The taste of coffee in his mouth makes the craving for nicotine come back with a vengeance. Now, he *would* suck Harrington's dick for a smoke. The thought is equally disturbing and entertaining. Billy doesn't dwell on what it means that he had that thought to start with. He doesn't dwell on much anymore.

Instead, he takes another sip of his coffee. It's still hot.

An hour down, six months to go.

He can do this. He has to.

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"You think I want this? You think I want anything to do with him? What was I supposed to do, uh? Tell me. Come on you, tell me, Nance, because I'm a fucking idiot and I don't fucking know."

Wheelers and Byers showed up before Harrington could come back with the cookies. They didn't spare a moment to come and gape at Billy, Harrington ushered them down the hall, where Billy suspects the kitchen turned sanctuary must be.

It started with terse murmurs, but quickly escalated to full blown shouting.

Billy doesn't like it. He doesn't like that Harrington is angry, he doesn't like how his voice rises and sharpens. He doesn't like what it might mean for him.

But there is nothing he can do, just sit there and risk a glance at Harrington when he stomps back in the living room. He takes in his narrowed eyes, dark with anger.

Shit, Billy thinks.

"I never said that," Wheeler snaps. Harrington runs a hand through his hair, then crosses his arms over his chest.

"Then what are you saying, Nance?" He cuts through the distance between them with his palm, then back his arms go over his chest, tense, defensive.

"I am just saying that it's wrong to own people."

Harrington laughs, head tilted back, but it's not a happy sound. It's grinding and jagged and it makes something clench tight in Billy's guts, it makes him breathe a little quieter.

"Really? And here I thought it was cool. I mean real *classy* ," Harrington's face twists into a sneer.

"Steve," Byers steps in.

"You are not taking this seriously."

"Nance," Byers tries again, but his voice is no more than a rasp. Billy struggles to hear him over the Wheeler's and Harrington's shouting match and the pounding of his own heart.

"Oh I'm taking it very seriously. Tell you what, once he's broken in I'll let you borrow him so you can see for yourself how fucking seriously I'm taking this whole slave owner business -"

"That's exactly what I mean, Steve! This shit is real it, you can't joke

about it -“

“You think I don’t know? You think I don’t fucking know?”

“Guys!” Byers finally gets through to them. They must sense something in his weird, chalky voice because Harrington and Wheeler shut up. Billy doesn't dare looking up, but he can feel their stare on him like an unwanted touch, and Billy thinks fuck, then he doesn’t think anymore because Harrington’s trainers are in his line of vision, within reach because he’s on his knees, he’s on his knees and when did Billy get to his knees? He can’t remember, *he can’t remember* , but can’t panic about it because he needs to listen - over the rush of blood to the head, over his hammering heart - he needs to listen like the good boy he is supposed to be because Harrington is saying something, he’s saying *what the fuck man?* and *uh-oh* , Billy thinks, that doesn’t sound good, does it? It sounds like Billy didn’t even make it to three hours before fucking up, after all. Harrington’s hand shoots forward and Billy closes his eyes and holds his breath and braces and *waits* . He waits.

“‘rove.” Billy swallows. “Hey, man, look at me. Look at me.”

It’s gentle, but it’s still an order, one Harrington seems fond of. Maybe Harrington wants him to look as it happens, wants him to watch it come, like his old man.

Billy opens his eyes and Harrington shifts into focus, crouching in front of him, hands open, palms up, long pale fingers splayed. Billy frowns. Is it going to be a slap then? He thought Harrington was more of a punch you in the face kind of guy, but then a slap is more humiliating, isn’t it? You punch a man, but you slap bitches and pussies and your faggot of a son.

“Sorry,” Billy blurts, because he *is* , he’s sorry he ever thought he could *not* fuck up. He knows better now. Harrington will teach him. Harrington who is frowning again and looking at him, blinking and frowning some more, and Billy presses his lips closed, bites his tongue until it bleeds, because really, really, why can’t he shut up and take it like a man?

“Steve,” Wheeler calls, steady and quiet, and Billy will never admit it

aloud but he is impressed at all the nuances she can convey through Harrington's name alone.

Harrington flinches, ducks his head, hair in his eyes and Billy can't tell what he's thinking. He never could.

So when Harrington's hand grasps Billy's, where it is laying on his thigh, useless, and Harrington's eyes find his - Billy is so surprised he stares back.

"I'm sorry. We scared you," Harrington says, all serious and honest, hand steady and warm on his, and Billy wants to laugh and laugh, and then laugh some more because Billy is not scared, Billy is *resigned* . But he doesn't say that, he lets Harrington pull him up and guide him back to the couch and feed him cookies and more coffee and orange juice. Wheeler and Byers join them with small talk and wide, unthreatening smiles, and Billy bites into his cookie, sugar and crumbs on his tongue, sweet, too sweet, and thinks *oh, it's going to be carrot then* .

Notes for the Chapter:

potential triggers for this chapter
violence
Neil
non-con drug use
mindfuckery
slavery
shock collars
electric shocks as correctives/punishment
restraints
panic
dissociation
anxiety
let me know what you think. I'll try to update every week, if I don't shout at me here or on Tumblr @ boudoirwriter

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

> Sorry about the delay, folks. It's been a shitty couple of weeks and this chapter was a bit of a pain to edit. BUT it's nearly 8k words so I hope that makes up for the wait.
>
> I'm updating the tags, full disclosure of triggers and further author notes at the end. As usual, be careful, this is bit of a psychological minefield... and if you think I've missed any tag, do let me know.
>
> Last but not least thank you to all the lovely people who left comments/kudos. It all helps keep the self-doubt at bay. So, thank you.

Steve

Nancy and Jonathan won't stay for lunch. They do stay for the *chat* though, and for that Steve will be forever grateful.

"We've gone over the paperwork," Nancy explains to Hargrove, who is maybe listening. Maybe not. Hard to say when he won't meet their eyes. "Mr Harrington - Steve's dad - He bought your contract. We -"

Steve watches her lick her lips and thinks he can't remember their taste.

"We don't know why," she says. "Steve has tried to reach him, but he keeps getting the voicemail. Hopefully, he'll call back soon and we can get this sorted out."

Yeah, right, Steve thinks and rubs a hand on his face. He is tired. He had planned wasting the day on his couch, nursing his hangover, watching tv and napping. He sleeps better when it's daylight out, and school starts again on Monday. School, shit. Okay, o-fucking-kay, one thing at a time, Harrington, come on, you can do it. He leans forward, elbows to his knees, palms pressed together and addresses

Hargrove, who so far had been as quiet and as still as a statue.

“My dad’s abroad, it might take a while before we hear back from him. And until then, well - there’s nothing we can do. I can’t remove the collar, I can’t even take this stupid thing off,” he growls and pulls at the cuff. It feels so heavy around his wrist, a horrible reminder of his new role. “I mean we are stuck together, and I - I know we had our, uh, differences in the past, but please - don’t - I don’t know, man - don’t kill me?” He finishes off with a pitiful laugh and looks at Hargrove with what hopes will come across as a friendly look. And that’s when he sees Hargrove staring, face pale and cerulean eyes wide, staring at Steve’s fingers picking at the cuff and then, only then Steve remembers that the cuff is what sets the collar off and he’s been sitting there, *playing* with it, in front of the guy wearing said collar.

God, Hargrove must think that Steve’s either a complete moron or a total dick.

Hargrove licks his lips. “I’ll be good,” he says quickly, too quickly, gaze still glued to the cuff and Steve knows with sudden clarity that he *is* both a moron and a *dick* .

He grimaces and moves his fingers away from the cuff.

“Sorry, man, I’m sorry I wasn’t -” *thinking? You never think, Steve!* “Right, lunch then? I’ve got frozen pizza,” he stands and claps his hands together But then Nancy says, “Best if we leave you guys alone, give you some time to adjust, we’ll see you on Monday, yeah?” and Jonathan nods and follows her out and now there’s only Steve and Hargrove left and the awkward, deafening silence.

“I’ve got Pepperoni,” Steve blurts and smooth, Harrington, real smooth. But Hargrove says nothing so Steve goes to hide in the kitchen once more and gets to work. He turns on the oven, rummages in the freezer, unwraps the pizzas. As he waits for the oven to heat he keeps busy, keeps himself from thinking - clears the kitchen island, picks up the paperwork he went over with Nancy and Jonathan. Only then his attention goes to the rumpled plastic bag the woman left behind. He takes in the contents with a frown: it’s Hargrove’s clothes, the ones he must have been wearing when - Steve swallows, mouth dry.

He puts the pizzas in the oven, then takes a deep breath and, bag in one hand, he goes back to the living room. “They left your things,” he says, going for casual. “I thought - maybe you’d want to get out of those scrubs?”

Not a moment later Hargrove is standing from the couch and slipping off that hideous outfit and it’s nothing Steve hasn’t seen before, but this time is different, it’s not the locker room, it’s his home, it’s Hargrove standing in boxer briefs in his living room and -

Steve’s face feels hot but he can’t figure out why. He chalks it down to envy and a sense of inadequacy. Steve is - well, he’s all right, isn’t he? Fit, and tall, nice hair. And yet, compared to Hargrove he feels clumsy and gangly.

Plant your feet.

He remembers the incredulity at going against Hargrove on the basketball court, thinking it fucking unfair that all solid muscle should move with such ease and precision. He tried to look away then and tries to look away now but he couldn’t, can’t. Hargrove steps into his jeans and when his gaze meets Steve’s there’s something unexpected blooming on his face, like you planted primroses and got carnivores, until he ducks his head to button up. Steve would call it self-consciousness if this weren’t Hargrove, the same guy who thought nothing of getting into Steve’s face in the gym showers.

Hargrove pulls a faded shirt out of the bag. Something catches on the fabric, falls to the floor with a soft clink.

Hargrove’s necklace, both medallion and Hargrove’s ring dangling from the chain. He doesn’t move to pick it up, just stares at it, brow furrowed as if he doesn’t recognize it.

So Steve, who is dying for an excuse to move, to stop staring, picks it up and holds it out for him.

Hargrove takes it, fiddles with the clasp. He can’t seem to get his fingers to work, though.

“Wait,” Steve blurts and gets the necklace off Hargrove’s hands and unhooks the claps. Even with his bitten down nails, he manages quicker than Hargrove. “Let me.”

Hargrove stays very still as Steve steps closer, circles his arms around Hargrove’s neck, latches the clasp closed. His fingers brush the collar and Hargrove flinches. Steve pulls away with a jerk, a nervous laugh.

“Sorry,” he mutters, runs a hand in his hair. The loss of Hargrove’s heat against him is strangely acute, and Steve takes another step back, just to be safe. Hargrove’s lips part minutely. He doesn’t say anything, but some of the tension in his shoulders seems to bleed out of him and Steve thinks that at least he got this right, and how pathetic is that?

+

They are halfway through the second pizza when the phone rings. Steve leaves Hargrove on the couch with a “help yourself, man.”

He wishes it to be his dad, he expects it to be Dustin, he does not expect to hear from Max.

At least he assumes it’s Max, because the first thing he hears is a biting: “Is Billy there?”

“Max? How do you -” he tries to wedge in but she won’t have it.

“Steve,” short and flat. She sounds on a warpath. “Is he there?”

Steve licks his lips. “Uh, yeah?” He offers, at a loss. “We’re having pizza -”

She hangs up on him, just like that, and Steve is left staring at the handset and wondering what the fuck was that about.

He grabs two cokes from the fridge and goes back to the living room, finds that Hargrove is slowly working his way through another slice

of pizza.

“That was Max,” he says, holding out a can.

Hargrove frowns, but gives him a short nod, takes the can and leaves it at that.

+

She arrives on her own, nose red from the cold and the skating. She says nothing when Steve gets the door, just pushes past him, whirl of apricot hair and determination, and barges into the living room.

Her voice is rising before he can close the front door and join them.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” she’s growling. Hargrove doesn’t reply, just stares at his coke, jaw clenched.

Max is not intimidated by his silence. “We came back and you weren’t there. Neil said -“ she presses her lips together, hard, swallows whatever she was about to say next. “I thought you were *dead* - But then Will heard you were here.” She says, low, thin arms crossed over her chest, stares at the ceiling, takes a long deep breath. “I told you to leave my friends alone.”

“Hey,” Steve tries. “It’s all right.”

Max ignores him. Of course.

“Max,” Hargrove murmurs.

“You *promised* ,” she hisses. She shakes her head, hard, stomps to the couch. “Get up, we’re going home.” She grabs Hargrove’s wrist and pulls, as if he’s an oversized toddler that won’t leave the playground. The coke sloshes in the can, foams and spills on the floor and Hargrove’s face just then is enough to kick Steve into action.

“He *can’t* ,” Steve snaps

And the finality in his voice must somehow get through her anger because she turns to frown at Steve. Hargrove is still quiet, not looking at her, staring at the coke on the floor, face pale and pinched, so it's up to Steve to bring her up to speed. He pinches the bridge of his nose. *Jesus* .

"What do you mean he can't?" She narrows her eyes at Steve and Steve sighs.

"He -"

"He means he owns me," Hargrove decides to chip in. He tilts his head, the collar, half hidden by the buttoned up shirt now obvious. Max goes quiet, the room goes quiet, as if Hargrove sucked the air out of it. Steve can only hear his own heart beat in his chest. *Thud, thud, thud.* He looks at Max and she's staring at Steve as if she has never seen him before.

"What the hell?" she exhales, eyes wide and horrified. "Steve, what the hell?"

"Neil had the Centre pick me up after you and Susan left," Hargrove continues in a flat monotone, as if he's been asked to read from a book he's sick of. He's looking at his hands. They are pressed together, but Steve can see them shaking, minutely, a private earthquake. "They dropped me here this morning."

Max is still staring at Steve the way she's look at a demodog, lips curled back, freckles stark on her pale face. "You bought my brother?"

"What? *No!* " Steve flaps his hand uselessly in his urge to explain. "My dad did, for reasons unknown, and conveniently forgot to tell me."

"That asshole," she mutters. For a moment Steve thinks she's talking about his dad, and he nods along. "Wait till mum hears about this."

"You can't tell her," Hargrove says, clipped, finally looking up.

"If she knew what he's really like she'd ditch his sorry ass."

Hargrove grimaces. “She knows,” he murmurs.

Max scoffs. “That’s not true.”

Hargrove bites his lips, his features twist, darken. Steve sees him snatching a look in his direction, pause, consider.

“If she knew -” she starts and just like that something gives and the moment Billy opens his mouth Steve recognizes his tone immediately, the vicious bite of his words, the dark mirth entwined in them like poison ivy. It’s Billy Hargrove, grade A asshole, rearing his ugly head. *Hello* , Steve thinks with grim satisfaction and plants his feet.

“Night you ran off with your boyfriend? They came home and you weren’t there. And who was supposed to babysit you?” He pretends to think about it, snaps his fingers. “Oh, that’s right, me. Piss poor job I did, bet they wished they hired Harrington instead because you’d have done as he fucking says, wouldn’t you?”

“Billy, that’s unfair -” Max protests, nostril flarings. Hargrove raises an eyebrow, laughs, high pitched and mean.

“Unfair? Tell me about it,” he spits. “You disappear god knows where and it’s my fault - it’s me who has to be taught a *lesson* - and Susan - she - she’s just standing there and -”

Max has gone pale, eyes wet and hurt. Steve winces. “That’s enough,” he blurts, softly.

He might as well have punched Hargrove in the face. His eyes go wide and he snaps his mouth shut, brings a clenched fist to his lips, presses against them so hard that for a moment Steve thinks he will break the skin.

Steve swallows, hard. “Hey,” he tries, because he doesn’t know what to do.

“Can I leave?” Hargrove says suddenly. His voice is quiet and rough as he looks at Max. And then Max is looking at him, and Steve blinks and frowns and then realises she’s waiting for him to give Billy permission. “I - I need a minute. Please,” Billy whispers.

Steve is so shocked he doesn't trust his mouth so he just gives a jerk of his head. A moment later Hargrove disappears towards the kitchen without a word.

"Max," Steve says.

"What?" She snaps, is looking at him, chin up, hands on her hips, lips pressed in a tight line, eyes brimming with anger and tears.

"Are you going to hurt him?"

"What?" he gasps. Why is it so easy for everyone to believe he could be a monster? "Do you really think I'd do that?"

She seems to think about it and Steve's stomach feels tight. She sniffs, shrugs. "He hurt you."

"Yeah, well," Steve runs a hand in his hair, takes a shaky breath. He can hear the thud crunch of Hargrove's fist as he broke his face. "I'm not like that," he says. He hopes.

Billy

He's still trying to calm down when the kitchen door opens. He asked for a minute, but not even a year could prepare him for this. Still, he has to force himself to get a grip, let go of the kitchen counter, turn around and face Harrington. Face the consequences of his stupidity.

Why can't he keep his mouth shut? God, Max drives him crazy, always could. And Harrington, well - let's not get there.

"Hey," Harrington steps closer, brow furrowed, dark eyes brimming with concern. He must be worried that Billy will lose it again, must be thinking that the Centre scammed him. God, if he were Harrington he'd ask for a refund. It's clear that Billy is a lost cause.

"Are you all right?"

He's not. He can't remember ever being all right. But he has some semblance of control now, he can keep himself in check and do what

he's told for once. His stomach is sick with apprehension and his body is twisted in a tight coil, desperate to fight or run.

He can't do either, so he nods.

"Come on then, Max is waiting," Harrington says. Oh. Billy licks his lips. Of course. She was the target of his outburst, it's only fair she gets to see Harrington putting him in his place. He thinks of Susan, of her flinching and trying to look away, he thinks of Max. She might want to watch, it's her right, but she's thirteen, she doesn't know what it can be like - Should he dare? Should he risk a worse punishment?

It's *Max* . He dares. "Does she need to watch?"

Harrington's frown deepens. "What?" Then something like horror spreads over his features. It doesn't make sense, but then before Billy can process his reaction Harrington grabs him by the shoulders, seeks his gaze and Billy is pinned under those hands and those eyes, a specimen in the biology lab.

Taste of the drugs suddenly in his mouth, his thoughts scatter out of his head like blackbirds at a gunshot. He can only stand there, as if naked under Harrington's gaze, the deafening rush of his panicked blood in his ears, stand there and take it.

It's what he deserves. He'll feel better after, he'll be a good boy. That's what they said. He's starting to believe it.

"Hargrove - *Billy* ." A squeeze to his shoulder, gentle, those eyes, velvet soft. He feels like sinking into them, disappearing. Wouldn't that be nice? "I am not going to hurt you, okay?" Harrington takes a breath, tongue flicking over pink lips. "I know you don't know me, that you have no reason to trust me - and I know that they trained you to expect it of me as if that's - that's *normal* ." He grimaces. "But, I won't." Another shuddering breath, Billy can smell coffee and vanilla, his eyes hardening, their light coalescing into something like a promise. "I *won't* ."

Billy's legs are threatening to give, but that's all right, Harrington is holding him, his grip firm and yet gentle on his shoulders. Billy

doesn't like to be touched, it usually means pain, and he doesn't know what to do with touching that is not pain. And yet he doesn't want Harrington to let go so he stays and breathes and for once he hopes.

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Max is sitting on the couch when Billy manages to move his legs and go back to the living room.

"How long," she says the moment she gets sight of him and Billy knows what she's asking.

He shrugs. "Since before you and your mum came along. It's why my mum left," he says. What he means is: it's not you, it's *me* .

"I should have known," she scoffs and at the same time Billy shakes his head.

"I didn't want you to. And it's not your mum's fault."

She gives him an incredulous look. He swallows, takes a breath.

"Max, listen. There's nothing she can do."

"Well she could kick him out," Max mutters.

"And then what? The house is in his name, the car, the bank account - she only works part time and for shit pay and you've got to finish school. She kicks him out and then what?"

"So what are you saying, uh?" she huffs. "That I go back and play nice to that sick fuck -"

"Yes, Max. That's exactly what I'm saying."

She shakes her head, works her jaw. "You are unbelievable. How can you say that?"

“Because if I’m not there, who do you think he’s going to go for next?”

“He wouldn’t dare,” Harrington blurts. Billy barely stops himself from rolling his eyes. Of course Harrington would think that, what does he know? The worst that daddy Harrington could ever threaten him with is what? Take away his AmEx?

“Yeah well, I thought the same and look where that got me.”

He turns back at Max. “I told you, remember? We are family now, and I’ve got to look out for you, but now - now, I can’t,” he swallows and looks straight at her and Max’s mouth falls open slightly at what she must see on his face. His next words are barely a whisper: “For once, do as I say, all right? Please, Max.”

Max gives a terse nod and that’s all he needs.

+

Max promises to be on her best behaviour around Neil and to keep in touch. Harrington takes her home, with the understanding that he’ll drop her off where Neil can’t spot the Beemer.

Billy watches her move towards the door, then stop and turn around, chin set. She stomps over and hugs him. It’s more like a tackle, her face all but head butting him in the sternum. He’s too shocked to do anything, but stands there, speechless as she runs off.

Harrington has this weird little smile on his face and Billy is thinking what the hell?

“I’ll be back soon,” he says, taps his cuff to the device that the collector plugged in the hallway, confining Billy to the house. “Feel free to take a look around, watch the telly. I don’t know - relax?”

Relax? Billy blinks but doesn’t say anything, just watches him follow after Max.

Then he’s alone in Harrington's big empty house. Harrington told him to relax, and it didn’t sound like an order but Billy *can’t* , not when he can see the mess they left on the coffee table, crumbs and coke still on the floor. He winces at the sight. Harrington said he wouldn’t hurt him, and Billy hopes, like he hoped his mum would come back for him. And look how *that* turned out. So he better clean up that mess, because Harrington said, all serious and shit, and his mum *promised* - soon, darling, soon - to but here he is, *here he is* . So he better start behaving like the good boy he’s supposed to be.

Steve

He stops at the 7-Eleven on the way back from dropping Max. He needs to be alone, he needs to think. He walks through the aisles, under the neon lights glare and the questioning stare of the pimply cashier.

Eventually he grabs a toothbrush, a cheap orange one. He’s not sure they have any spare in the house. Holding the stupid plastic case drives it home that Hargrove is going to spend the night there. He’s going to spend tomorrow and the day after that and if Steve doesn’t manage to get a hold of his dad he’s going to spend the next six months with Steve - as Steve’s *slave* .

And Steve knew but it isn’t until he’s holding that stupid piece of plastic that he gets it. He really gets it.

“Are you buying that,” pimply guy at the counter inquires around a mouthful of skittles. Steve starts, drops a couple bills on the counter.

“Keep the change,” he mumbles and goes back to the car, sits in the Beemer. The parking lot is dark and the car is cold and Steve's head is buzzing.

His dad - Nancy, Dustin, *everyone* always tells him that he doesn’t think and they’re right, Steve doesn’t think, he tries really hard not to, because when he starts thinking he can’t stop. He gets all these weird ideas in his head, like glimpses into the future, or rather many possible futures, one worse than the other. Once, when his parents

first left him home alone for a long weekend, he started thinking what if they don't come back? And then they were supposed to be back for lunch, but come dinner time *they still weren't back* and Steve was just sitting on the sofa, watching the shadows grow in the living room, thinking that maybe their car crashed, maybe they were dead and what would happen to him now? Would people remember he was home alone? Would aunt Rose take him in? Should he call anyone?

That's how they found him when they finally got back around midnight. They found him sitting in the dark, running possibilities in his head. When he explained what happened, his father shook his head with a weary sigh, his mom looked at him in concern and said "oh, dear."

Then of course they didn't talk about it anymore. It's not like it didn't happen again, but Steve did not bring it up, and knew better than to stay on the sofa when going slightly mad. Better get in bed, this way he could pretend to be sleeping, instead of freaking out.

Which is what he's doing now. He couldn't freak out with Hargrove right there or with Nancy and Jonathan or with Max. But he can freak out now, alone in his Beemer, hand still gripping the stupid toothbrush, he can freak out about Billy Hargrove being his slave, and he doesn't even need his hyperactive imagination to see the infinite ways this can go so, so *wrong* .

+

It's weird coming home and finding the lights on. Steve stares at the incongruous sight, something weird, like anticipation, blooming in his stomach.

He gets in and is hit by the faint, endearing smell of cooking and suddenly he's six and it's Thanksgiving and his mum is telling him, wash your hands. Only he's not, it's not.

He follows the smell to the kitchen and stops on the door, staring. Hargrove is at the stove, stirring something in a pan. He must have heard Steve come in, because his shoulders are tense and he stopped stirring. He puts the spatula down on a plate - Hargrove and a spatula. Steve can't stop staring.

"I thought I would get dinner started," he says and sounds defensive.

"Uh, thanks," Steve offers, like the pathetic idiot that he is. "Smells good."

Marta, the housekeeper, does the grocery shopping and prepares meals for him and freezes them. By the time Steve is back from school, he's barely aware that the kitchen has seen any action at all so this, *this* is - Steve realises with barely concealed horror that his eyes are stinging, his throat is closing up.

What the fuck? He panics. *What. the. fuck?*

"I'll set the table," he blurts, because he can't trust himself to be here, he can't let Hargrove know that the smell of homemade cooking in his goddamn home can reduce him to tears. So he sets the table and tries not to think, not to think about any of this. A bottle of red wine from his mum's stash helps.

By the time Hargrove is bringing the food to the dining room, Steve has almost polished off a second glass.

"You want some?" he offers. Hargrove gives him a quick look, then shakes his head and gets down to filling a plate, a single plate. He puts it down on the placemat at the head of the table then he steps back. Steve goes to sit down, frowns.

"Are you not going to eat?" he says, his hand on the chair.

"Do you want me to eat?" Steve blinks. Fuck, not this again. Steve was almost feeling good, for once.

"Do *you* ?" he snaps before he can think better of it. Hargrove presses his lips together, hands twitching useless at his sides. Then he nods, a terse bob of his head, a curl bouncing. Steve fingers itch to tug on it, push it back behind Hargrove's ear. They are cute, he had not

realised before, hidden as they were under Hargrove's mullet. Oh god, what's wrong with him? Steve feels the heat rising to his face at the thought, he hopes Hargrove will think it's the wine. "Then get a plate," he bites out, looking away, embarrassed. He reaches for the water pitcher, but his hands shake and some water splashes on the table as he fills his glass. Hargrove moves to mop it up.

"Stop it!" Steve barks, grabbing Hargrove's wrist. Hargrove goes still, half bent over the table, eyes unblinking, glued to the polished surface. Steve lets go of his wrist as if burned. He works his jaw, rubs at his heathed face. "Sorry, I just - *sorry* . You don't need to do this, you know? You don't need to cook or clean up after me or whatever they told you you have to do, okay." He huffs a chuckle. "I mean, I appreciate it, but it's not you, is it? You don't want to do this. You wouldn't want to do any of this. And, I don't know, it freaks me out that you think you have to." He exhales a shuddering breath, drags a hand through his hair. "Sorry. I mean it."

Hargrove pauses, thinking, a little frown between his eyebrows. His eyes flash with something, but he keeps staring at the water on the table.

"It is me," he says, shrugs. "I looked after Max most of the time. And it seems like you need looking after, Harrington." There's no bite to his words, but he looks up and Steve's face goes *hot* .

Thankfully, Hargove doesn't expect a reply. He sits down with his plate and Steve starts stuffing his mouth before he can say something stupid. It's pasta and chicken and veggies, and some sort of sauce making it cheesy and melty - Steve moans around his bite.

Hargrove raises an eyebrow and Steve flushes again.

"It's really good," he mumbles, defensive, but slows down. He steals a look at Hargrove, who is pushing his food around his plate.

"Aren't you hungry?" He says.

Hargrove frowns, scoops another mouthful of food on his fork, stares at it.

“No, I - It’s just - weird.”

“What’s weird?”

“This. Us.”

And yes, Steve *knows* . If anyone told him he would have Hargrove making him dinner in his home he would have called them crazy. And yet, he can’t help but enjoy the warm food, the quiet company. Then he remembers Hargrove would not be here if he had a choice. Steve takes a sip of water, swallows the sudden nausea.

“Yeah, well,” he shrugs. “Beats reheated pizza, though.”

Billy

Harrington helps him clear the table and insists he should wash the dishes.

“You cooked,” he argues. By the time he’s done it’s late and Billy is exhausted. Harrington also looks like he might use a good night sleep, going by the pinched look on his face, the shadows under his eyes.

They move upstairs and Harrington seems to do a lot of internal debating on how to manage for the night, flapping his hands and babbling in that dorky way of his, as he shows Billy around.

“We got a guest room,” he says, and opens the door to a room bigger than Billy ever even dreamed of. There’s a queen bed, a desk, a wardrobe. Harrington walks over to the bed, picks up the pillow and sniffs it. “I think these get changed every week, but I’ll get some fresh sheets if you want. And uh, something for you to wear,” he says. “Main bathroom is down the corridor, you could take a shower if you want. There are towels and stuff in the cabinets.”

Billy watches him run off and he considers the offer for a shower. He hasn’t had a hot shower in two weeks, and before that the shower at home could only produce a sad, lukewarm jet. He bets Harrington’s shower actually has hot water and real pressure. So he goes find the

bathroom, the towels, he strips off.

The water is hot and the pressure hammering his shoulders make him groan. There's an assortment of products and he grabs a yellow bottle. Fabergé organics. He sniffs the contents - it smells like honey, like Harrington. It smells nice, *safe* .

He lathers his hair, ignoring the phantom feeling of longer locks, the collar shifting as he moves. He rinses off, considers the conditioner. Should he make an effort for Harrington? Would that make him more likely to keep Billy around?

He learnt early on that looking good is one of the few assets he has - looking good and putting on a nice smile could get him a free sandwich when Neil wouldn't give him money for lunch. And maybe Billy is mistaken, but sometimes he thinks Harrington looks at him like - better not go there, he decided after that stupid party, when Harrignton looked at him. Still, looking good can't hurt, so he spends a bit more time in the shower, letting the conditioner work on his curls. Eventually, he has to make the conscious effort of turning off the water and getting out of the shower. The mirror steamed up and that's good. He doesn't want to look at himself, at his too naked face, at the collar around his neck, at the stranger looking back at him through his own eyes.

There's a knock on the door. He wraps a towel around his waist and scrambles to open it.

Harrington is standing there, a bundle of clothes in his arms. Billy can see an orange toothbrush on top of the pile. Harrington's lips part, but he doesn't say anything. Billy's nipples perk up as the cool air of the hallway hits his chest and Harrington's tongue flicks to his bottom lip before his eyes dart away, frightened hares. There's only so far they can go before they stop and go back to Billy's chest, ensnared.

Oh , Billy thinks then quashes that thought, stamps on it with his boots, buries it down, deep deep down, under Neil's *faggot* and *pussy* .

"Brought you some clothes, and - uh, got you a toothbrush when I dropped Max off, forgot to say," he mumbles and thrust the bundle at

him. Billy takes it.

“Thanks,” he says.

“I -” Harrington clears his throat, waves a hand at the corridor. “I’m beat, I’m going to crash out the moment I hit the mattress. But let me know if you need anything all right? Or just, you know, help yourself. I mean,” he bites his lips, shakes his head. “You know what I mean.”

Billy nods, because it seems the right thing to do, then he watches Harrington turn on his heels and disappear into one of the rooms - his room, Billy guesses. He closes the door, the heat mostly gone. The mirror has cleared and Billy gets a glimpse of himself, skin wet and scrubbed pink, curls dripping water down his temples, his neck. And the collar, always the damn collar. He looks like one of those guys on the cover of those skin mags he used to stare at in California. He looks like he needs putting in his place, on his *knees* .

He barely resists punching the mirror. He goes for the border of the sink, instead, hard, the hit reverberating through his bones. The pain helps, helps him pretend his heart is not beating out of his chest. *Pussy* , Neil cackles in his head. Billy scoffs, rips off the towel and dries himself until his skin burns. Harrington gave him some underwear - his underwear - grey sweatpants and a blue t-shirt. It’s all soft on his skin, reassuring. It all smells like Harrington. Billy takes a deep breath and sets down to brushing his teeth.

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Billy has always been a light sleeper. Always had to be, sharing a house with Neil. So when he blinks awake in the dark, he is not surprised. For a moment, though, he can’t remember where he is. There is a faint blue light filtering from the window, pool light. *Pool, Harrington,* it’s his first conscious thought. The second is: *what the hell?*

He sits up in bed and frowns. There’s a noise, like a wounded animal.

Before he can process it he's up and opening the door. The hallway is dark and silent, no sign of Harrington. Billy can see light filtering under Harrington's door, like a beacon in the darkness.

He's deciding whether he imagined the noise, when it starts again. There's no mistaking it now, it is Harrington and he's *wailing* .

Billy is at his door in a moment, but by the time he pushes the door open, Harrington is quiet again. His mind registers the lights in the room, two desk lamps, a bedside lamp. Two flashlights on the bedside table, two more on the desk and an assortment of batteries and light bulbs in a shoebox. He walks closer to Harrington and stubs his toe on the wooden handle of a baseball bat poking out from under the bed.

What are you scared of? It's a fleeting thought, because Harrington starts twitching again, bedsheets twisted around him like he's been fighting with them. His eyes are moving like crazy under his eyelids, and he's gasping, short sucks of air intersped by whimpers and mumbling *nonono* .

Billy knows what it's like to be stuck in a nightmare. He's been in one for the last seven years. He puts a hand on Harrington's shoulder.

The next thing he knows he's on the floor and his head is ringing with the impact on the hardwood. Harrington is straddling him, bat in both hands raised high over his head and there are *nails* in it.

I am not going to hurt you, okay? it's all Billy can think before instinct kicks in and he raises his arms up to protect his face.

"Harrington!" he shouts.

The blow never comes. The bat clatters to the floor and only then Billy dares lowering his arms and looking.

Harrington is still straddling him, a hand extended as if to touch Billy but not quite. He's breathing hard, small shuddering gasps, and his eyes are wet with unspilled tears.

"I thought," he blurts. "I thought." He seems to be looking at Billy as if he had never seen him before, as if he cannot believe his eyes. He

starts shaking then, full body shudders that rattle him like wooden chimes in the breeze.

Billy swallows: he doesn't do feelings, he doesn't do comfort, especially not for guys like Harrington. But it looks like Harrington is about to have a seizure and Harrington is all Billy has, now, so if he sits up and puts a hand over Harrington's heart - and god, he can feel it beating against the palm of his hand - is in self-interest, okay? Not because he is worried about the guy.

"It's okay," he says, because what the fuck do you say in situations like this? "It was just a nightmare."

Harrington responds by releasing a shuddering breath. A tear escapes the trap of his eyelashes and runs down his cheek, leaves a glistening track that captures the glow of the lamps.

And Billy, dumb piece of shit that he is, reaches out and wipes it away, rough pad of his thumb against Harrington's peach soft skin.

Harrington stops breathing. Then he frowns, his face - his face slams *shut* and Billy knows with absolute certainty that he fucked up. Utterly. Irrevocably. As if there were ever any doubts that he would. He doesn't need to wait for Harrington to smack his hand away, scramble off him and leave the room without a word to know.

Steve

He sits on the damp bath mat, knees to his chest and stares at the locked door, chewing on a thumbnail. His eyes burn, his throat burns, his head burns. His cheek and his chest where Hargrove touched him, burn. *Steve* burns.

Fucking nightmares. Fucking Hargrove.

Steve knew this was bound to happen - the tension had been coiling all week, he knew he had an episode with his name on it waiting for him - he didn't know he would have Hargrove there to witness it.

The thing is, no one knows, and now Hargrove of all people.

When no one knew, he could pretend he was all right, he wasn't going crazy, as he must be. He tried inquiring with as much subtlety as possible, with Nancy, with Jonathan, with *Dustin* . But everyone is fine, just peachy. Everyone left everything behind, moved on with their life, thinking of school, girls, D&D. Everyone but him.

So he pretended he was all right too, he pretended he wasn't thinking about it, he wasn't dreaming about it.

Only now he can't because Hargrove, of all people, *Hargrove knows.* He knows that Steve screams - no, he fucking cries in his sleep like a fucking pansy.

He rubs at his cheek where Hargrove touched him, where *Hargrove wiped away his tears* , with calloused fingers and infinite care. It's the same cheek Hargrove smashed his fist on, over and over, as if set on cracking Steve open. Steve can't decide what's worse.

He stays in the bathroom for a long time, his ass going numb on the damp bath mat, his back hurting from hunching over, his nails bitten to the quick.

Finally, he gets up and goes back to his room.

Hargrove has left, the only sign he was ever there, that anything ever happened at all, the nail bat on the floor next to the bed.

Steve swallows. In his dazed awakening, he went this close to inflicting some serious damage on Hargrove. He stares at the nails on the bat and imagines them sinking into Hargrove's arms, ripping into skin, sinew and muscle, shattering the bones.

Steve swallows again and toes the bat under the bed.

He lies back down and stares at the ceiling until it turns light out, a pale milky grey January morning. A lifeless morning. That's exactly how Steve feels. Still, he gets up and gets dressed, because that's what he's supposed to do.

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He's still sitting on his bed, debating how to face Hargrove when he hears the doorbell. He recognises the ringing. *Dlin Dlon. Dlin dlon. Dlin dlin dlin dlon dlin dlon.*

He groans and rubs his face.

"I'm coming," he shouts, stomping downstairs. "Dustin, for God's sake, cut it out!"

"And good morning to you too." Dustin the moment he opens the door. He pushes past Steve, stomping his feet, discarding his hand knitted mittens and dropping his backpack. "I thought I would come checking on you, my friend, seeing how you missed our rendezvous, yesterday."

Oh, shit. He thinks. No, blurts out. "Oh, shit man, sorry I forgot."

"Yeah, I kind of got that when you didn't show up?" He waves a hand and goes straight to the kitchen. "Your loss, show was amazing and I had brought my mum's cookies - she made a fresh batch just for you to say thank you for babysitting me - but then you weren't there and I was worried - like, not worried *worried* I mean, just a bit, you know, but I stress eat and those cookies were just there and *what the fuck?* "

Dustin stops in the kitchen door and Steve almost walks into him.

"Steve." He breathes out, extends an arm, stopping Steve from going any further. "No sudden movements," he whispers and Steve rolls his eyes. "Billy Hargrove is in your kitchen."

Steve sighs and scrubs his face.

"Yeah, I know."

Dustin frowns, looks at him.

"Billy Hargrove is in your kitchen *flipping pancakes* ." He scoffs as if, do you also know *this?*

He's trying to parse the situation, rocking on the spot, undecided,

because *pancakes* but also *Billy Hargrove* .

Steve sides steps him and approaches Hargrove, who gives them a quick look and before turning back to the stove. He slides another freshly cooked pancake over a precarious pile. The kitchen smell likes coffee and butter and sugar. It smells inviting and safe, it *would* be inviting and safe, if not for Billy Hargrove stuck in the middle of it like a beartrap.

“What is this?” Steve says and he knows the moment the words leave his mouth that they come out bitchy. He doesn’t care. The night he’s had, he’s entitled to bitchy.

Hargrove has turned off the stove and started cleaning up. He stops at Steve’s question. If he weren’t Hargrove, Steve would say he’s fidgeting.

“Breakfast,” he says, quietly, and he looks up. He blinks at the expression on Steve’s face, a slow bat of curly eyelashes over ocean blue eyes and Steve is suddenly angry, because eyes such as those don’t belong on mean assholes such as Hargrove.

Because Hargrove knows and is making him breakfast - poor Steve had such a rough night.

Because Steve tried to do the right thing and got judged by Nancy and Jonathan and *Max as if he was the asshole.*

Well, he can be an asshole. He got plenty of experience.

“Uh, breakfast,” Dustin is saying. “That’s eh, nice, isn’t it Steve? Better than mayhem and carnage. Guess you worked out your differences -”

“My dad bought him,” Steve spits out, with a good dose of venom. He doesn’t look at Dustin. He keeps his gaze on Hargrove, he wants to see it, the widening of those eyes, lips parting. A flinch.

He’s not disappointed.

Dustin goes quiet. Dustin is never quiet. “Your dad bought Hargrove.” He exhales, eventually, and there’s a note of horror there, maybe at

Hargrove, more likely at *bought* .

Steve doesn't care. Steve steps into Hargrove's space, uses the couple of inches he has on him, taps his chin with two fingers. It's not unkind, but his next words are non-negotiable, a show of ownership, control. And *order* . "Show him," he says, and Hargrove swallows, tilts his head, eyelashes now shielding his gaze. But Steve can see his jaw tense, the twitch of his mouth.

Oh, yes, he can still be an asshole, if he applies himself.

Steve hums, fingers still on Hargrove's face. How does he like it? How does he like being vulnerable and exposed and having Steve's touching him?

Steve should feel better, but he feels disgusted and dazed.

" *Steve* ," Dustin calls, as if Steve was a particularly dense student.

He pulls his fingers back, Hargrove still not looking at him.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Steve hears himself say.

Billy

Harrington is pissed off. That much Billy expected. If Harrington had found him like he found him - scared, vulnerable - he would - well, he knows what he would have done, did. He smashed his face in. So Billy should have left him the hell alone, not gone into his room and wiped away his *tears* . Jesus Christ, what the fuck his *wrong* with him?

Pancakes are left cooling on the counter, Harrington only pausing in the hallway long enough to activate the device that will confine Billy to the house and shrug on his coat.

Billy's stomach rumbles, but he doesn't know whether he should eat. Harrington didn't say. He might have changed his mind and Billy is already in trouble. Why can't he remember that Harrington can fuck him up for good? *I am not going to hurt you, okay?*

God, Billy is so fucking stupid. He clears the kitchen, drinks some water straight from the tap, then he waits.

He uses the toilet when he can't hold it in anymore, figuring that Harrington would rather he does that than make a mess.

He doesn't dare do anything else, so he sits on the couch and waits and waits and *waits* .

At some point he must doze off, because when he opens his eyes again it's dark out. Harrington is not back yet but Billy figures he'd better make himself scarce. So he goes back to his room.

He lays down and stares at the wall in the dark until dots swim in his vision.

God, six months like this he's going to go out of his mind.

He wishes Harrington would hit him.

I'm not going to hurt you, okay? Billy snorts into his pillow. *Yeah, right.*

He doesn't know when he falls asleep but when he wakes up he can tell that there's someone in the room. *Neil* , he thinks, but there's no Neil, only Harrington standing by the door, light behind his back. Billy sits up, swings his legs over the side of the bed, waits for the inevitable, heart thudding in his chest.

"We got school tomorrow," Harrington says, taking a step into the room. He drops a bundle of clothes on the desk. "I need to pick Dustin up, so be downstairs by seven thirty, ready to leave."

Billy nods, but stops himself at *yes, sir.* He doesn't think that would go down well with Harrington.

"Until then I don't want to see you. Do you understand?" Harrington adds. It only takes another nod, then he leaves, closing the door behind himself. Billy is left alone in the dark, with a hammering heart and an empty stomach. He doesn't go back to sleep for a long time.

Notes for the Chapter:

further triggers in this chapter

implied child abuse, child neglect
anxiety/anxiety disorder
homophobic/sexist language (internalized)
threats of violence
panic attack (sort of)
withholding food as punishment
miscommunication (like whoa)
some tropes :)

Sooooo... You didn't think they would immediately kiss and make up, did you? :)
What do you think will happen next? I'm taking bets! Let me know what you think in a comment, that would make my day. Or come find me on Tumblr @ boudoirwriter

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

> Here we go again! Thanks for sticking with me and special thanks to anyone leaving a comment.
> Now enjoy a "quiet" moment between the boys (and a bunch of tropes!) before the shit hits the proverbial fan... :)
>
> As usual, mind the tags - though by now you should know what this story is about. And do let me know if I missed any!
>
> Further notes/trigger at the end.

Billy

He wakes up at six the next day, to the frantic beeping of the small alarm clock on the bedside table. He sits up, rubs the sleep off his face, and grits his teeth against the cramps that seize his stomach. He's hungry and there's nothing he can do about it. He would smoke, like he used to do when Neil would tell Susan not to set a plate for him. Smoking helped.

But he can't smoke now and he can't get in his car and count through the quarters he hid there for Max - always coming up short, even for a cheap burger in the worst diner, and having to sweet talk the waitress.

Thinking about it won't make his stomach stop trying to eat itself so he makes the bed, strips off the t-shirt - Harrington's t-shirt - and gets down on the floor. He goes through his push ups routine until his arms give out, and he crashes on his front, panting and dizzy, and covered in sweat. The clock says 7:05 and Harrington said to be ready by 7:30 - but then he also said to stay in his room until then. Fuck, what's this? A test? He hesitates by the door, trying to interpret the conflicting orders. Eventually, it's his bladder that takes the

decision for him: Billy really needs to pee, so he cracks the door of the guestroom open. The hallway is empty. He grabs the bundle of clothes Harrington left and makes a quiet run for the bathroom.

He drinks from the tap until his belly is sloshing, he brushes his teeth. There isn't a razor for him to use, so he'll have to live with the stubble. He gets in the shower and stays for a minute under the warm jet, but he's too keyed up to enjoy it. He washes quickly and once done he rubs his hair dry with the same towel he used yesterday. Harrington's rich boy products make his curls soft and shiny, the preppy clothes he gave him fit him weirdly, shirt too tight around the shoulders, jeans clinging to his thighs. But they are clean and clearly expensive. Billy takes a look in the mirror. He can't recognize himself but there's no time to dwell. He goes back to his room to get his boots. 7:25. He rushes downstairs, puts his boots on and stands in the hallway, by the front door, ready to go, just like Harrington said. Waiting. Like a dog.

There's some noise and movement from the kitchen then Harrington appears, striped polo and fluffled hair. He gives Billy a long, unreadable look then starts grabbing his things - keys and wallet from a table in the hallway, coat and scarf from a closet. He slips on his shoes then looks at Billy again, shakes his head. Billy holds his breath, but Harrington just gets back to the closet and pulls out another coat and a scarf.

Billy recognises both, he's seen Harrington wearing them when the season changed right after Halloween, fingers itching to touch the soft wool wrapped around Harrignton's pale neck, the bruises still stark on his face.

"Lock the door, I'll get the car started," Harrington says, thrusting the coat, the scarf and the keys at Billy. He pauses just long enough to tap his wrist cuff against the home device. It beeps twice and the light goes red, indicating that the collar proximity alarm will now respond to Harrington's whereabouts.

Could be worse , Billy thinks as he hurries to lock the door and follow him to the car, *could be the leash.*

Harrington's car is in the driveway and when Billy gets closer he

hesitates. Should he sit in front or in the back?

Harrington must somehow read his mind because he leans over from the driver seat and pushes the passenger's door open.

"Get in the front, I'm not your taxi driver."

Billy gets in and holds out the keys. Harrington takes them and slips them in the pocket of his coat without even looking at him, making Billy feel next to invisible. Why does he even care? Invisible is good, isn't it? Invisible means not getting smacked around - or worse.

And yet Harrington ignoring him drives him crazy. It always had. Before, he would have done anything to get those eyes on him.

Now, now though, he stares straight ahead at the fogged up windshield, while they wait for it to clear, engine running, Harrington rubbing his hands together and breathing on his fingers.

Eventually Harrington puts the car in reverse and reaches out with his arm. He's just grabbing the back of Billy's headrest as he turns to look back but Billy can't help himself, he flinches away, almost smacking his head against the window.

Harrington goes still and when Billy dares to take a look at his face he wishes he could smack his head against the window hard enough to pass out. Instead he suppresses another flinch and keeps his eyes down, staring at his hands, clasped in his lap. He can feel Harrington's gaze on the side of his face, stinging like a handprint, until Harrington releases a long heavy sigh through his nose and lets his foot off the brake. The car starts moving with a lovely purr of it's German engine.

Billy focuses on making his breathing quieter than that.

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They stop in front of a nice house and not a couple of minutes later

the kid that came around yesterday - Dusty or something like that - comes out, nerdy cap over curly hair, a massive backpack over his puffer jacket. He turns to shout something at the woman standing by the door. She waves and Harrington leans over the wheel to wave back.

Then the kid is in the car and with him loud, mindless chatter that kills their awkward silence.

“Hiya Steve, uh - Hello Hargrove. How are you this fine morning? Had some time to decompress?”

Steve sighs and Billy, well, Billy keeps his mouth shut. It’s safer these days.

“Put your seatbelt on,” Harrington says.

“Wait, wait, I’ve got something for you,” he rummages through his backpack and produces a tupperware. Harrington turns around to take a look at the contents.

“Is this what I think it is?”

“Yep. Triple chocolate brownies. Mum made them for you. But I helped - and you are going to share, right?”

Harrington rolls his eyes.

“Steeeeve!” The kid pleads, holding on to the container.

Harrington huffs and the kid must take that as a yes because he immediately pops the lid off the tupperware and stuffs a piece of brownie in his mouth, before holding out the container for Harrington. The brownies must be still warm because the car immediately fills with the smell of butter, chocolate and sugar and then - then it happens.

Billy’s stomach growls.

He can feel his face grow hot as both Harrington and the kid focus on him.

“Jeez Steve, did you forget to feed him?” The kid mumbles, mouth full. It’s meant to be a joke, but Harrington doesn’t reply, just stares at Billy and the kid must be smart or psychic because he senses something. He swallows, noisily, licks his lips. His next words are light, but cautious. “You are feeding him, right?”

Again Harrington doesn’t reply, but his knuckles on the wheel have gone white. Out of the corner of his eye Billy can see the kid staring at Harrington with something like incredulity on his face, mouth slightly open.

Billy wants to say that it’s all right, really, it’s nothing he didn’t deserve, but the kid is leaning between the seats and staring at him now, because Harrington won’t say anything, just clutch at the wheel and stare ahead.

“Hey buddy, when did you last eat?” Kid asks, brow furrowing under the curls. He looks all serious and shit. He looks like Max. Billy swallows the lump in his throat and glances at Harrington.

“He asked you a fucking question,” Harrington spits without even looking at him.

Billy licks is lips. All right then. “We had dinner.”

The little frown deepens, though he can only assume Billy skipped breakfast. Harrington, instead, Harrington knows Billy hasn’t eaten since Saturday.

“Steve.” The kid says and manages to convey some kind of glacial disapproval. He pushes the tupperware under Billy’s nose. “There, have a brownie.”

Billy can’t help himself, his eyes flick to Harrington again and Harrington turns toward him then. His eyes have always been dark, velvet and warm, waking up in your own room under your duvet and knowing you still got a few hours rest in the dark. But now they are stranded in the woods at night dark, with no moons and no stars, pitch black, cold and dangerous.

“Have a brownie, Hargrove,” he says, and it’s the last thing he says

until they drop the kid off, the boy giving Steve a worried look and *a talk later, all right?*

They sit in the parking lot then, Harrington's knuckles bone white on the steering wheel, his dark eyes two mean slits. Billy's mouth is full of chocolate and nausea.

"Are you doing it on purpose?" He hisses. "What is this? Revenge? Making me look like a fucking monster who'd starve you?"

Billy stares, speechless.

"What? No!" He protests.

"Then why the fuck you haven't eaten since Saturday?" The Tupperware jostle in Billy's lap and falls to the floor. He bends to pick up the brownies, they crumble his fingers. "Answer the fucking question!" Harrington grabs his shoulder and pulls him up and Billy - Billy loses it.

"You didn't say!" He grabs Harrington's wrist, hard enough to bruise and shouts back. His training kicks in and so does the nausea but he can't stop *he can't stop* . He tried to be good, he tried but nothing seems to make Harrington happy with him and now he's hungry and confused and helpless - god he's so fucking helpless. "Because you didn't say and I don't know all right? I don't know what I'm supposed to do, I don't know what you want!"

He lets go of Harrington's wrist and presses his hands to his mouth to try and keep a frustrated scream in. The chocolate is making him nauseous, the anger too. All that anger with nowhere to go, he could melt from the inside.

"You need to say," he chokes out. "You need to say, because I can't figure it out myself. And I know it's crazy, I know I should know but I don't, all right? I don't know anymore. So you have to say and I swear I'll do what you say, man, and if I don't you'll punish me or whatever and - and I'll try to do better next time. I'll be good. But you have to say, okay? That's how it works now, that's how I work. Please."

Harrington is looking at him and Billy can't take the horror and pity on his face so he goes back to picking up the brownies, blinking back tears of anger and frustration, his face numb.

He is fucked up. He knows he is fucked up. But seeing Harrington realise how fucked up he is makes it all the worse.

Still he has to say it, if only to drive the point home. Chocolate crumbs all over his fingers he rubs at the corner of his eye, sniffs, suppressed tears stinging at the back of his throat. He looks at Harrington and whispers: "I'm fucked up."

Harrington blinks. For a long, depressing moment he says nothing. Then he smiles, slow and crooked, and yet it hits Billy the sun in July, warm, blinding.

"Well, thought you had realized the other night," Harrington says. "I'm fucked up too."

Steve

They skip first period and he buys Hargrove a double breakfast. Then he just sits at the table, in the small diner, cheek on the palm of his hand and watches him eat. He only says stuff like "small bites" "drink some juice" "how's the coffee? Sally always makes it too strong."

Hargrove does as he says, and polishes off his plate. Steve takes in the flush in his cheeks, the spot of grease at the corner of his mouth, and he feels something warm and right settling in his belly. Being an asshole brings with itself a grim, bitter satisfaction, like a hangover. This, this is just *good* . He gives Hargrove a few minutes to settle, wipe his mouth and fingers on a napkin then he says: "We should go see the principal."

He thought about it yesterday. They can't really pretend nothing changed. People might see the collar, might start asking questions. Better get a headstart.

"But first some ground rules." Hargrove trains his eyes on him and they are so blue, luminous in the morning light from the windows.

Steve takes a breath. He made a mental list while watching Hargrove eat, and he hopes he hasn't forgotten anything.

"You don't need to ask for permission to eat, or drink, or use the toilet, or sleep, or get dressed or anything else that would keep you safe and comfortable. I'm am the dumbest person you'll ever know and I'll fuck up a lot. So. I need you to tell me, all right?" he takes another breath, because Hargrove is staring but Steve is not sure he's getting it, leans over the table. "You know how you said I need to tell you what to do? Well you also need to tell me what to do, because I don't know what to do most of the time, never mind in this situation. So if I forget to get you breakfast, or dinner, or anything else, I want you to tell me. If you are unsure about anything I want you to tell me. And if I'm not there I want you to think as if you were me, okay? Like what would Steve do if he had to take a leak? He'd go take a leak! What would Steve do if he were hungry? He'd have some food! Makes sense?"

Hargrove is watching him, lips parted. He licks his lips.

"Can I," he clears his throat. "Can I shave?"

Steve huffs a laugh, settles back in his seat.

"Aww man, why? I dig the rugged look," he jokes. Hargrove looks away then, something like a flush coloring his face, and Steve feels heat rise to his own cheeks. "Just kidding. Of course you can. Tell you what, think about other things you may need - like, I don't know, clothes that fit? - and we'll do some shopping after school. Sounds good?"

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The principal is not pleased.

He watches Steve while he explains, tapping his fingers on his desk. Tap tap tap.

“So what should we do.”

The man seems to ponder the question for an awful long time.

“To be honest with you, Mr Harrington, I have no idea. I never heard of anyone owning a companion in Hawkins and certainly we never had one attending Hawkins High.”

Of course, Steve thinks. Lucky me.

“The question is, why do you want Mr Hargrove to attend classes?”

Steve frowns. What kind of question is that?

“Because in six months he’ll be free again and he’ll need his degree then.”

“A noble reason,” he says, and Steve raises an eyebrow. “I take it you are not familiar with the concept of once in the system, always in the system?”

“Uh - no?” he adjusts in his seat, uncomfortable at the principal levelled stare. “What is that supposed to mean?”

The principal looks at Hargrove who is very busy staring at his boots.

“It means that no one expects you to think - never mind care about Mr Hargrove's future. See, no one expects Mr Hargrove to have a future.”

Steve is stunned speechless.

“Well,” he clears his throat, thorn between incredulity and anger. “You should know I don’t do well with expectations,” he scoffs. “Just ask my dad.”

The principal snorts, and after a long minute of more pondering, he turns to the filing cabinet at his back. He rummages for a bit then pulls out two folders.

“Let’s take a look at your transcripts then,” he says.

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Steve leaves the principal's office in a haze of worry and wonder.

Wonder because apparently Hargrove has a GPA score of 4.9 and before the shit hit the fan he was on his merry way to a fully funded ride at UCLA. Wait until Nancy hears about that.

Worry because now the stakes have gone higher. Hargrove was working on a bright future out there, and it's no longer enough to get him to graduate and keep him out of the system. He should still have a chance at that future.

Steve, on the other hand, *well* . The principal suggested that the only good thing to come out of the situation is that Steve could learn a thing or two from Hargrove, academically speaking.

There's no UCLA in Steve's future, there's not even Tech at this stage. It will be a miracle if he graduates.

That should have been depressing news, but Steve did what he does best, laughed it off, running a hand through his hair to hide the embarrassment, as they left the principal's office.

"Told you I'm dumb."

Hargrove frowns. "You are not dumb."

It's the first time Hargrove has said something like a statement without prompting. His voice is low and controlled, it reminds Steve of his voice from before. *You were moving your feet. Plant them next time, draw a charge.* Steve stares at his profile as they go grab their stuff from the lockers, but he bites his tongue instead of telling Hargrove how wrong he is. Steve is dumb, but not *that* dumb.

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By first break he starts to think they might get through this. The principal wrote them a vague note to show to the teachers, excused them from PE and advised them to try and not flaunt their *relationship*.

Steve is totally on board with that. Not flaunting. No sir. Pretending it didn't even happen. That's one of the few things he's great at. They have Biology third period, and they take that class together. There's a couple of weird glances their way when they arrive together then some more ogling at Hargrove because well he doesn't look like Hargrove, what with Steve's clothes and the scarf wound tightly around his neck. He takes it in stride though, pastes his usual smirk on his lips and sits down on a stool, legs splayed, arms crossed on his chest, biceps and shoulders straining the seams of the shirt Steve gave him.

Steve stares at Hargrove's transformation, and the realisation hits him that the Billy Hargrove he thought he knew didn't really exist.

This is not you , he had told Hargrove, but then what does Steve know? *I don't know what you want* , Hargrove had said in turn and it all boils down to that. They don't know each other at all.

Steve shakes himself out of his reverie and starts making more mental notes for Hargrove. Fitting clothes for Hargrove. Upping his own push up routine, he decides with a point of envy.

Mrs Darren drones on and on about mitosis and Steve tunes her out. He didn't sleep much last night, jolting himself back to wakefulness every time he started slipping deeper into unconsciousness, too scared to dream again, to wake up again with tears in his eyes, a scream on his lips and Hargrove watching him.

"Hey," Hargrove says and Steve barely catches himself from sliding off his stool and face planting on the counter, vines and sharp hungry cold flowers chasing him the moment he closes his eyes. Hargrove's hand is there to steady him, though, warm and solid on his shoulder, and Steve leans into the touch maybe for a moment too long, because there are whispers and looks until he swallows and shrugs Hargrove's

hand off. He busies himself taking notes and ignoring the looks, especially the puzzled one Hargrove gives him, until the end of the double period class. They can get through this, they have to.

Billy

Harrington is fucking oblivious, that much is clear. Billy instead is hyper aware of the stares, the whispers, the gaping mouths, the frowns, the smirks. Once he revelled in it, incited that kind of response. It was his reality check, his way of knowing he was in control of his own narrative. Now it grates, feels like a heavy touch to an exposed nerve.

He falls back into his habits, into his *Billy-don't-fuck-with-me-Hargrove* persona. Squares his shoulders, plants his feet, juts his chin. He doesn't know how long the charade will last, will serve him, but as long as it works, as long as it keeps people the hell away from him and Harrington, then it's worth keeping up.

It takes some effort though, his reformed mind screaming at him to make himself small, to defer to Harrington, to *please* .

But Harrington is giving him a chance. He could have pulled him out of school, could have decided that he is too much of a hassle and the future Billy had been working on in secret, late at night, would have vanished in a puff of smoke. Instead it's still there, fragile as a spun glass but still possible, still within reach. To hold on tight to, but not too tight.

Billy can still get out. That's the only thing keeping him sane, a thin thread of hope. And Harrington gave it to him.

They make it out of Biology in one piece and Harrington got a stupid smile on his face even if he's swaying on his feet with tiredness and nerves.

They walk back to the lockers, first Billy's then Harrington's. That's where Wheeler and Byers find them.

Wheeler has that pinched look on her tiny face, like she bit into

something sour and can't spit it out.

"Oh, hey Nancy," Harrington says and he seems pleased to see her, he seems oblivious of the shitstorm she's about to unleash. Harrington is obviously terrible at reading people. Billy knows better. Billy got plenty of practice and motivation. "Jonathan." He nods at Byers, who his darting looks left and right, as if searching for the nearest exit.

"Steve," Wheelers says. "We've been looking for you."

"We met with the principal." He looks around, lowers his voice. "Had to explain the situation, make some plans," he rubs his neck. Wheeler frowns, as if she didn't believe Harrington would have thought to do that.

"What did he say?"

"Well, turns out that someone was hiding a massive geeky brain under that mullet," Harrington gives Billy a weird look, almost fond. "And will be off to UCLA when this is over. So we'll stick to that plan."

Wheeler's frown deepens.

"What about you?" She enquires and Harrington sort of shrinks under her inquisitive gaze.

"Uh, what about me?" He huffs a laugh, it dies quickly. "Nance, come on. You read my essay," he shrugs and Wheeler can't hide a grimace. "Not exactly college material, am I? Good thing that I can always work for my dad, eh?"

"Is that what you want?" She insists. "Now that, you know." She tightens her grip on her books, holds them close to her chest, a knowledge shield against Harrington.

Harrington looks at her and his eyes go impossibly soft. Byers is looking away, rocking on his feet, hands in his pocket.

And Billy thinks, *oh, that's how it is then* .

“Yeah, well,” Harrington licks his bottom lip, chuckles. “I’ve got other reasons to stick around, now.”

She clenches her jaw, looks at Billy as if annoyed at having to be reminded he exists.

“Are you going to get him some clothes at some point? People are talking, you know?”

Harrington stiffens, ducks his head. “Shit, I didn’t think about that.”

She huffs at the quiet admission, rolls her eyes. “Yeah, that’s sort of the problem with you Steve, you never think -”

“Hey.” The warning growls out of Billy’s mouth before he realises it’s there. Wheeler stares at him, speechless, and Byers is moving to plant himself between Wheeler and Billy. As if.

They stare at each other until the bell rings and Harrington grabs Billy’s arm and pulls him back.

“Come on, man. We’ve got class.” Harrington won’t look at Wheeler and Wheeler won’t look away from Billy. That’s all right. If she’s busy gaping at Billy she is not berating Harrington.

I’m dumbest person you’ll ever know, man, Harrington said and Billy thought he was just saying. But it seems that Harrington actually believes that, that Wheeler and the principal and everyone around Harrington believe that and make a point of reminding Harrington at every opportunity.

And the thing is, Billy knows what mindfuckery is. He’s been at the receiving end of it for years, his old man calling him a faggot and telling him to stop seeing his whores in the same breath.

And the way Billy sees it, Harrington is caught in a special loop of it, where he believes the shit he says about himself and everyone else around him believe it as well and together they make it *real* . Harrington might not be book smart. So what? That doesn’ make him *dumb* . And Jesus, Wheeler is supposed to be Harrington's friend, they were together for fuck’s sake.

Harrington starts pulling him away but Billy can't let it go. He was never good at letting things go.

"You keep telling him he's stupid but you want him to go to college? So which one is it?" He really wants to know but Wheeler is speechless and so is Harrington. He recovers first, though, and drags Billy away, giving him sideways glances all the way to Billy next class.

It's AP English. Harrington has Business Management.

"What was that?" Harrington says quietly. Billy shrugs. He's not sure he knows the answer.

Billy looks at the students filing in, inevitably wondering at Harrington and Billy. The last everyone heard of them interacting, it was about Billy ruining Harringoton's pretty face. So now, being all chummy, Billy wearing Harrington's clothes - they're obviously his clothes, you'd have to be blind not to figure that one out - make people wonder. At least no one has seen the collar and the cuff yet.

"Nevermind," Harrington huffs, moving away. "I'll see you later, okay?"

Billy nods and watches him walk away before taking his seat. It won't take long for people to figure things out, put two and two together. It's inevitable.

But for now he can pretend. After all, what can go wrong in the next two hours?

+

It happens as he leaves AP English. He's in the hallway, ignoring people's looks, when the collar starts beeping.

Billy freezes, a hand going for the device before his brain kicks in and supplies the obvious. It's the proximity sensor. He has stranded too

far from Harrington and he has five minutes to get back in range and get Harrington to deactivate the alarm before he gets shocked unconscious.

He has no idea where Harrington is. He must have left the main building though, because the collar should have that much coverage.

Someone bumps into Billy and he stumbles. Should he go to the principal and ask for Steve's next class? What if that takes him even further away from Harrington?

Where is he? Where is he?

Surely his cuff will have gone off as well, and he'll come find Billy. Billy all but runs towards Harrington's locker thinking *come on come on come* on.

If Harrington isn't there, Billy will lock himself in the male toilets and wait for the worst. At least people won't think he's having a fucking seizure.

He's at Harrington's locker, but so are Tommy H. and Carol. Of course, they must have smelled blood in the water. Before Billy can pivot out of their range Tommy is clapping him on the back and gracing him with a full toothed smile.

"Hargrove, man. I was just telling Carol here that you must have taken a hell of a New Year resolution. Is that why you are wearing Harrington's clothes?"

"What's that beeping?" Carol pipes up. "Boyfriend got you a pager for Christmas?" Harrington is not there and the collar is still beeping and Billy *can't* . He needs to get out of here, he needs to control the damage, but he can't think, he can't think the wave of panic cresting -

"Tommy, fuck off."

It's Harrington, terse and gruff, and Billy could cry with the relief of that voice in his ear, his hand on his arm.

"Let's go," he mutters and drags him off to the male toilets.

“Oh, so that’s how it is!” Tommy cackles after them. Billy doesn’t care, he doesn’t *care* .

Harrington has already locked the door behind them and is pulling off the scarf. He taps his cuff against the collar and just like that it goes silent.

That’s when Billy’s legs give, but Harrington is there to catch him, to follow him to the ground.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I had to pick up my Remedail Maths homework in the new building and - god, now you know why people say I’m stupid, because I -”

Billy is gasping, big gulps of air, fingers clenched into the front Harringont’s polo. He can’t trust his words, can’t even think, mind fuzzy with the adrenaline crash. He puts his fingers on Harrington's lips and Harrington gets it, goes quiet, blessedly quiet. Then it’s just them breathing, together, until Billy’s limbs stop prickling, until he stops shaking.

“Fuck, that was close,” he breathes out, a puff of incredulous laughter against Harrington’s neck. He doesn’t remember slumping against the other boy, but Harrington is the only thing keeping him upright. Harrington who is still quiet under his fingers. He pulls them away, though they itch to stay on Harrington’s lips.

“We’ll speak to the principal, get our schedules sorted so that it won’t happen again.”

Billy nods, unable to do much else. He nods and lets Harrington help him up.

+

By lunch time the stares and the whispers have intensified. Harrington is watching him as if Billy were a thanksgiving turkey. After a while Wheeler and Byers come to sit down with them, Wheeler almost slamming her tray on the table.

“I don’t think Steve is stupid,” she begins, defensive. Billy pauses with his fork mid air. She turns towards Harrington. “I don’t.”

Harrignton blinks.

“I just think he could try harder. Also, sometimes he acts without -“ she pauses, works her jaw. “Considering the ramifications, especially when these have an effect on him. Some may argue that’s selflessness.”

She looks at Harrington then and Harrington flushes. It would be endearing to watch if Harrington's unwavering attention to Wheeler didn’t grate on Billy’s nerves.

Harrington swallows noisily around his mouthful. “Uh,” he says. Billy raises an eyebrow. “Thanks, I guess?”

But Wheeler is not satisfied yet. She takes Harrington’s hand and says, all soft and earnest: “I really don’t think you are stupid, Steve. I’m sorry if I made you believe otherwise.”

She turns to Billy then, eyes as hard as pebbles.

“Thank you for telling me.” Sounds more like a *fuck you* but Billy is not going to labour the point, not when Harrington has that happy look on his face. So he shrugs and goes back to his lunch.

There’s a few more weird looks from other students but Wheeler’s and Byers’ presence helps shield some of that.

Billy doesn’t remember the rest of the afternoon, only that at some point he and Harrington are picking the kid up.

Curly hair is watching the Beemer warily from where he’s waiting with Max and Sinclair.

“Do you want to speak to her?” Harrington says.

Billy shrugs.

“Don’t want to scare Sinclair off.”

“He doesn't scare easy,” Harrington offers. “I am not sure what your problem with him is, but you could always, I don’t know, talk to him.”

Billy shrugs. “I don’t have a problem with him. My old man would, though.”

Harrington just watches him and Billy sighs. What is he scared of? If anything, given the situation he’s in, he’s got nothing to lose.

“I’ll be right back.” He gets out of the car, shivers in Harrington’s coat. He can see the kids tensing as he approaches, frozen ground crunching under his boots.

“Hey, Sinclair,” he says, hands in his pockets. Max frowns and takes a step forward. Billy simply looks at her and she pauses.

“That night at Byers house,” he begins then stops because he didn’t rehearse his speech, doesn’t even know what he wants to say but here it is. “I was scared and I was angry and I took it out on you and Max - and Harrington. And that was wrong.” He takes a long calming breath. “I just - I know saying sorry doesn’t change shit, but I am. Sorry, I mean.”

“Uh,” Sinclair says, eyes wide, and looks at Harrington’s kid and Max for a cue. Dustin opens his mouth, eyes set but before he can put a word in Billy turns to him.

“No, I’m not here because Harrington made me.” He gives the kid a meaningful look. “And before you ask, no, he’s not starving me or beating me or anything like that. It was a misunderstanding.”

The kids all start talking at once.

“So it’s true that Steve owns you?” That’s Sinclair.

“He’s starving you?” Max screeches.

“You didn’t have breakfast!” That’s Harrington kid, as if skipping breakfast is an infringement of human rights.

Billy pinches the bridge of his nose, hard.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. You're attached to his skirts like a bunch of toddlers, and you’re telling me that you don’t know the guy? You really think he’d do that?”

They seem to be thinking. Hard.

Billy huffs. God, he'd kill for a cigarette.

"One more thing," he says looking straight at Sinclair. "My old man? He's dangerous. You need to be careful around him, okay? Don't go to the house, don't let him see you alone with Max." Sinclair starts frowning, opens his mouth to protest. "I know. It's shit and it sucks, but it's safer, okay?" He pulls at his scarf and he can see the moment Sinclair's eyes find the collar, because they go wide, making him look so very young. "You don't want Max to get one of these."

"Your dad sold you?" Sinclair bristles, and there's plain horror on his face, more than Max and Billy ever were. But Max and Billy know what Neil is like, and stopped being horrified a long while back. Maybe they shouldn't have. Maybe it's their fault too, for making it *normal* .

He nods. "There's nothing stopping him from selling Max, too. So what I'm saying is, don't give him any reasons to."

"As if he needs a reason," Max grumbles. "He didn't need one to sell you."

Billy shrugs.

"It's different. You are Susan's and a girl and -"

You didn't get caught sucking off the neighbours' kid under the pier. You don't look like the one that got away. You don't remind him each and every day what a fucking failure he is. He can't say any of that though.

"I've got to go," he says instead. He looks at curly and jerks his head towards the Beemer. "You coming?"

Steve

They survived the first day. Somehow. Relief hits Steve like the first lungful of the good stuff when he hauls the last of their shopping bags in and closes the front door.

“Jesus,” he exhales, scrubbing his face, as if he could get rid of the bone weary tiredness that way. Hargrove is in the kitchen already, putting the frozen stuff away. Steve got ice-cream. He figured they deserved some after the day they had. He even asked Hargrove what his favourite flavour is. Strawberry it turns out. Go figure. Steve got a whole tub of the stuff anyway.

They also got some Chinese takeaway. Hargrove offered to cook but Steve argued they should take it easy, put on a movie, chill. They’ve got to do it all over again tomorrow.

“So, what did you tell Dustin?” He asks. Hargrove is sorting out the fridge and Steve is emptying the last of the shopping bags. The Chinese smells like heaven. “I thought he would give me one of his lectures, I spent the whole day getting ready for it.”

“Yeah, kid can talk.”

Steve huffs a laugh.

“Just told him the truth. That you are not my sadistic jailer.” He shrugs. “Bet he’s disappointed.”

“And Sinclair? You were talking for an awful long time.”

“You were keeping an eye on me?”

Steve colours, but he shrugs at the small jibe. He’d rather have that than the shell Hargrove has been turned into. “Just wanted to make sure you were okay, man. They can be, uh, *intense* .”

Hargrove chuckles. “Tell me about it. Max has no off button.” He shuts the fridge and turns around, leans back on the counter, looks at Steve straight in the eyes. It’s progress, if Steve has ever seen any.

“I figured I might as well apologise, while I have the chance. I was a dick to him.” He pauses, licks his lips. “I was a dick to you.”

Steve looks away first, that blue stare too intense, like a flame licking at his skin, making it tender and sensitive, exposed.

“It’s all right,” he mumbles.

“No, it’s not. You were down, not even fighting back and I just - I couldn’t stop.” His hands are clenched on the counter, knuckles white. “If Max hadn’t stopped me I don’t know that I would have. I could have killed you.” He’s still looking at Steve, his gaze almost feverish in its intensity. “You should have filed an assault charge. Why didn’t you?”

Steve shrugs because he can’t say he had bigger problems that night than Billy Hargrove.

“Don’t know man, embarrassment? Got my ass kicked and barely got two punches in. Didn’t exactly want to advertise that.”

“And now? Why not even the score now?”

Steve frowns. “Do you want me to? Hurt you?”

Hargrove shakes his head.

“Good, because I don’t want to. I’m not like that.”

Hargrove flinches, gives an ugly grin, flexes his hands.

“No, that’s me.”

Steve looks at him, thinks about these last couple of days, Hargrove waking him up from his nightmares, telling Nancy off for making Steve feel stupid, apologising to Sinclair. And the realisation he doesn’t know Hargrove at all hits him again.

“Is it though?” Steve is quick to continue. “I mean, you are not who I thought you were.”

“Neither are you, King Steve.” Hargrove shakes his head, his curls bouncing. “Everybody telling me you used to run this place, but here I am, at your mercy, and you are -” He frowns, waves a hand towards Steve. “Soft.”

“ *Soft?* ” Steve scoffs. He’s not sure if it’s meant as an insult or what but when he looks at Hargrove’s face that looks soft too.

“Yeah, you know. Nice. Caring.”

“Yeah well, nice and caring, that’s me,” Steve smirks. “But let me tell you, I’ve got nothing *soft* .”

The moment it’s out of his lips he realises what he has just said. And fuck, but Nancy is so right when she says he doesn’t think. Hargrove parts his lips as if to say something, a strange look on his face, and Steve kicks himself into action, grabbing at the takeaway containers: “So? Food? I’m starving,” he blurts, because he doesn’t need Hargrove to think he’s trying something. Not when a minor misunderstanding ended with him not eating for two days. He all but runs for the couch, balancing boxes and napkins. “Grab some coke from the fridge, will you?” He throws over his shoulder. “Or I’ve got beer.”

Hargrove follows with the drinks and they both sprawl on the couch and dig into the food while Steve flicks through the channels for something to watch. Hargrove is still giving him little glances, like what the hell, but Steve is good at pretending he doesn’t see those.

“Nothing on,” he laments. “Wanna pick a movie?” He nods towards the cabinet and with a last wondering look Hargrove goes to take a look. He comes back with *An American werewolf in London* and Steve wants to say hell no, because he knows he’s going to have a nightmare tonight, the scare with the collar and the tension with Dustin put him in the mood. He can feel it gathering behind his brow, read to pounce as soon as he closes his eyes. But Hargrove picked that one and he told him he could so he shrugs and settles in and focuses on breathing.

Half an hour in he needs a break.

“Ice cream?” He says, but doesn’t wait for Hargrove to reply, just goes to hide in the kitchen, trying not to think about rabid, growling monsters. He takes as long as he can to scoop ice cream into two bowls, chocolate chip cookie for himself and strawberry for Hargrove.

When he goes back to the living room, Hargrove has switched off the movie and is watching the news.

Steve holds a shudder of relief but doesn't ask. He digs into his ice-cream and watches Hargrove lick melting strawberry off his spoon, lips red and shiny with it. That's the last thing he remembers. He doesn't remember setting his bowl down on the coffee table, or falling asleep. He jerks awake against a warm, solid weight and he blinks in the blue light of the tv. David Letterman is wiggling his eyebrows and talking animatedly, but he can't hear what he's saying.

He realizes he's slumped against Hargrove, who is sleeping with his head thrown back on the couch and his lips slightly parted. His arm is around Steve's shoulder and Steve is tucked up against his side, legs curled up, the blue throw on him. He doesn't remember any of this. Hargrove must have settled them but it doesn't make sense. Steve debates getting up, going to his room, but then he thinks of the dark, quiet hallway and his stomach drops. He feels warm now, safe. He feels like he could sleep again, his cheek against Hargrove's chest, steady breathing in his ear. He closes his eyes. Just a minute, he thinks, just one more minute.

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When he wakes up again dawn is filtering from the windows and he's alone on the couch, warm and cozy under the throw. He blinks in the dim light, rubs at his eyes. He slept the whole night and it feels like his bones have melted off him.

Steve stretches, his spine popping, a satisfied groan escaping his lips. He hears music coming from the kitchen and the smell of coffee and toast.

He pads over, scratching at the stubble on his chin and finds Hargrove showered, shaved and dressed, making breakfast. He's wearing the clothes they bought yesterday. Not his usual eye catching style, but something less conspicuous, nice jeans and button down

shirt. He looks good, he looks like someone who's going to UCLA.

He tenses when Steve approaches, possibly because of how his last attempt at breakfast ended.

"Do I smell coffee?" Steve blurts, a question and a hope at once. Hargrove hums and fills a mug for him.

"How do you like your eggs?" He asks, handing him the coffee. It's hot and strong and Steve takes a scalding sip and moans into his mug. He's not embarrassed. He spent the night sprawled over Hargrove. He's way past being embarrassed. If Hargrove wants to give him shit about it, so be it. And yes, Hargrove might feel sorry for Steve - unlikely - or might be serving his own interests - and in his situations, could you blame him? Thing is Steve hasn't slept this well in *months* . It's pathetic, but he'll take what he can get. Beggars can't be choosers.

"You don't have to, I can -"

Hargrove rolls his eyes.

"Going by the boxes of frozen pizza in your freezer, I have a feeling you can't cook for shit."

Ouch. But yeah, true.

"Scrambled," he says and as he sips on his coffee and watches Hargrove crack eggs into a pan, Steve thinks, with a pang of guilt, that having Hargrove here is not so bad after all.

Notes for the Chapter:

Triggers

Miscommunication
Withholding food as punishment (though this is a misunderstanding)
Self-esteem issues (Steve)
Tommy & Carol
Threats of electric shock
Tropes :)

Thank you for reading! Let me know what you think in a comment or come find me on Tumblr @ boudoirwriter

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

> Massive apologies for the delay, I really struggled to get into the right headspace to edit this chapter. Because, uh, things get quite ugly. You'll see what I mean. So take a deep breath, here we start the descent.
>
> My heartfelt thank you to all the lovely people who has stuck with this so far, and have left kudos and comments. I'm very behind replying comments (I will over the next couple of days) but I read all of them and they keep me coming back to this wretched thing when I start questioning what the hell am I doing to these two poor boys...
>
> Mind those tags and if you think I have missed any, do let me know please. Check the triggers in the end notes (spoilers though). If you'd like to know more before reading get in touch on boudoirwriter. I'm happy to answer any questions.
>
> Sadly unbetaed.

Steve

Three days turn into three weeks. There are challenges, but for the most part, they fall into a comfortable routine. There's school in the mornings and beside Tommy H being on a crusade to out them as fags of the year, the rest of the students move on to new sources of entertainment. Being excused from PE means that they can keep hiding the collar and the cuff for now, with none the wiser about their sudden closeness. There are Nancy and Jonathan, supportive and providing safety in numbers. And there are the kids, coming over for movie nights or whenever they feel like, really.

Which is why Max shows up on a Thursday with a battered backpack. It's filled to bursting with Hargrove's records, some books.

“I told mum I was taking these to the charity shop,” she says, eyes shifting. Hargrove says nothing but nods and takes the books and the records to his room. He doesn’t come back down for a long while but when he does he makes mac and cheese, just like Max’s likes it, and they sit down on the couch with steaming bowls to watch a new episode of *Miami Vice* .

Steve still can’t get hold of his dad, and he’s still cutting it too close to failing his senior year, but he keeps telling himself he’s got time. Almost one month down. They can do this.

Then they get the call on Tuesday evening.

Hargrove is upstairs taking a shower and when he comes down in a faded t-shirt and soft sweatpants he just needs to take a look at Steve’s face to know.

“What’s wrong?” he says. Steve can’t find the words. He’s biting on his thumb and can’t stop. Hargrove frowns and walks closer, takes Steve’s wrists, pulls the thumb out his mouth. Steve bites his lips instead, exhales.

“It’s was - it was the Centre.”

Hargrove’s hand tightens on Steve’s wrist for a second. Steve’s breath catches. Then Hargove lets go, steps back. When he speaks his voice has no inflection and Steve doesn’t know how to feel about that.

“What did they want?”

“They say we are due for a checkup, uh, this Saturday.”

Hargrove stays silent for a long time.

“I’ll get dinner started,” he says eventually and Steve watches him go to the kitchen with an incredulous look.

“Hey,” he tries but Hargrove has closed off and Steve knew that news from the Centre couldn’t be good news, but seeing Hargrove’s reaction makes him think that they are bad, bad news. His stomach is clenched and his tongue is stuck to the roof of his mouth. He watches Hargrove wash tomatoes, and then move to the cutting board to chop

them and Steve says: “Hey,” again, and, “Talk to me, please.”

Hargrove chops and scrapes and stirs and Steve watches, waits. Eventually they sit down to eat. Steve pushes his food around, Hargrove doesn’t even pick up his fork, just places his hands on the table, fingers splayed out. It doesn’t hide the fine tremor shaking them.

“It’s going to be bad, Harrington,” he says, not looking up, and Steve stares, open mouthed. “Real bad, but you’ll need to play along.” He looks at Steve then, blue eyes boring into him. Steve finds he can’t blink, he can’t even breathe. “Promise me you’ll play along.”

“What do you mean -“

“Steve. Please.” It’s the first time Hargrove has used his name. Steve clicks his mouth shut, swallows his questions.

“I - yeah, okay.”

Hargrove’s shoulders sag as if relieved, and he takes a sip of water, picks up his fork. Steve resumes pushing his food around and wonders what exactly he promised.

Billy

Of course there would be a check up, how could he think otherwise? The threat looms on them, dark and heavy like a thunderstorm cloud for the rest of the week. On Saturday they leave the house at half past five. They are not expected until nine am, and it’s a two hour drive but Harrington doesn’t want to chance it.

They stop for coffee after an hour and they sit on the hood of the beemer and blow on their styrofoam cups.

Then Billy says: “They will probably drug me.”

Harrington starts and sloshes some hot coffee on his hand with a yelp.

“Drug you?” He’s giving Billy this incredulous look as he shakes the coffee off his fingers.

“Yeah,” Billy says. “That’s what they did during training. I’ll probably be like, I don’t know, stoned?” He snorts, but Harrington doesn’t look amused in the least. “It’s standard procedure, to make you respond to the training more quickly.”

He shrugs, takes another sip of coffee, scalds his tongue.

He knows Harrington is watching him, eyes too large on his pale face, but he can’t meet his eyes. He can’t.

“Fuck,” he breathes out, rubs at his mouth. “When were you planning on telling me?”

Billy doesn’t point out that Harrington’s anxiety was already hitting the roof.

“I am telling you now, ain’t I?”

Harrington shakes his head, sets his jaw, lets out a long suffering sigh.

“All right. What else do I need to know.”

“I’ll probably be half naked most of the time.” Billy tries a leery grin but the joke falls flat. “They might put handcuffs on me. To be honest I don’t remember much, with the stuff they give you I can barely remember my name.” He clicks his tongue. “Speaking of, you should call me Billy.”

“What?”

“Come on, try it now. It’s easy, two syllables.”

Harrington frowns. “Fuck off.”

“Fuck off, *Billy* ,” he corrects with a smirk that doesn’t quite reach his eyes. Harrington is staring at him, with this helpless look and Billy doesn’t know how to make him understand. He wipes clammy fingers on his jeans, tries to find the words. “What I am trying to say is that

it will be your show. And you have to put up a good one or they'll think that you can't keep me in my place and that I need retraining."

Harrington goes even paler and for a moment Billy worries he might pass out. When he doesn't, he keeps going, because they are running out of time and Harrington needs to know, needs to be prepared.

"You might have to like - touch me. Or other people might want to and you have to let them. You might have to hit me or call me names. You have to do it and you have to convince them you are fine with it, okay?"

"I thought you didn't want me to hurt you," he says and his voice is so small and Billy knows, with a kind of soul crushing certainty that he is fucked. He's not getting out of that Centre, and he's not getting out of the System. Ever. "And I promised I wouldn't. I don't want to."

Billy swallows, panic and pleading and he can't do this, Harrington can't do this but he can't give up - he can't. "I know," he blurts, urgent now, trying to make Harrington *see* . "I know, but look, it's either you or them. And they have cattle prods."

Harrington's sharp inhale tells him what he thinks about that.

"Look, it's just for today. And I wouldn't ask this, okay? I wouldn't ask this of you but I can't - I can't go back." And there he is, pleading, when he thought he wouldn't. What a farce.

Harrington is stubbornly staring at his trainers, mouth pinched, face pale.

"Billy," Harrington says then and how fucked up is it that the first time Billy gets him to say his name it has to come out like Harrington is about to cry?

He doesn't think, he can't think, he just grabs Harrington's hand where it sits between them on the hood of the beemer. It's cold, the warmth from the coffee cup stolen away by the chill of this winter morning.

Harrington is silent for a very long time, his hand limp in Billy's. Then he takes a shuddering breath, squeezes back, hard.

“Okay. Fuck, okay.” He sniffs, then looks at Billy with grim determination in his dark eyes, and there’s something in the set of his mouth, something Billy recognises. “I won’t let them take you. I won’t.”

Billy looks back and believes.

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“Wait.” They are in the parking lot and Billy's stomach is in knots, throat clenched against the nausea. He takes off his scarf. He knows they wouldn’t appreciate him hiding the collar. Then he reaches inside his shirt and takes off his medallion and his ring. He adds his ring to the chain and hands it all to Harrington. For safekeeping.

Harrington stares, a question in his eyes.

“They’d take it,” he says with a shrug.

Harrington nods, fingers fiddling with the chain. Then he works the clasp open and loops the chain around his neck, tucks it under his shirt.

“This all right?” He asks quietly.

Billy nods, not trusting his voice. He swallows and looks away.

Harrington pulls his keys from the ignition. “Come on, let’s go.”

Steve

Hargrove’s necklace weighs like a millstone against his heart. Steve takes a deep breath as they leave the safe nest of the beemer and make their way to the reception. The Centre looms grey and cold, a box of concrete and steel. A tomb.

Steve lied.

He *can* do this. There’s another Steve, the one he pushed deep, deep down in the dark, damp well of his heart, that can actually do this.

Enjoy it, even.

It's the Steve that watched Jonathan's face break as his camera cracked on the ground. It's the Steve that told Nancy to go to hell. It's the Steve that fucked a different girl every day and forgot about them the next, laughed in their face if they came crying, asking *why, I thought we had something* . It's the Steve flaunting his family name and money around, looking at the rest of Hawkins as his court. King Steve.

Much as he hates that Steve, he was strong, stronger than he is now, popular, respected. Much as he hates him, it is tempting to let him back out, let him take care of the uncertainty, the hurt, the failure, the loneliness.

He bites at his cheek, tastes blood.

I won't let them take you, he told Billy. So he won't, whatever the cost.

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"We'll see you in a month's time," the trainer says and that's their cue to leave. Steve pulls on the leash and Billy stumbles to his feet. He's still wearing handcuffs, wrist strapped together behind his back.

Steve hears himself say: "Can we keep the cuffs?"

The trainer laughs, makes another scribble in his notepad, hands over the keys. "Sure."

Steve smirks, a pull of muscles. His face feels sore with it, lips numb. "Great man, thank you." He doesn't move to unlock them, puts the keys in the pocket of his jeans, and pulls on the leash.

"Let's go," he snaps and Billy moves to follow, eyes on the floor, unfocused.

It's a quiet shuffle all the way back to reception. There they hand back their coats and Billy's clothes.

Steve holds both and they leave with Billy still naked from the waist up. It must be 30 degrees out.

Steve keeps pulling on the leash and putting one foot in front of the other and not thinking. He's good at that.

He opens the passenger door to the beemer and pushes Billy in. He's shivering, skin mottled purple. He's still out of it and can't seem to work out how to get in a car anymore.

Eventually Steve shuts the door, gets behind the wheel and peels out of there. He drives until the Centre disappears from view, then he pulls over, slams on the brakes, gravel spraying.

He barely makes it out of the car before he's on his hands and knees, stomach spasming as he throws up coffee and bile.

He gasps between heaves, wet shuddering intakes of air. He's crying, ugly crying, tears and snot and big wet sobs, like when he was five and his rabbit died, and he found it cold and stiff in its cage the next morning.

Billy . He reminds himself. Billy needs him and he's breaking apart.

Behind a veil of tears he dares a look back at the car. Billy is still in his seat, hunched over, eyes closed, still half naked.

"Get up Harrington," he tells himself, his legs like jelly. All of his body wants to curl down, fade to black, if only for a while but he can't - he can't.

He slams his fist on the frozen ground, skins his knuckles on gravel and dirt and feels nothing, so he does it again, and *again* until the hurt registers, gives him something to focus on, turns his vision from panic black to angry red. Anger at himself. "Get up," he growls. God, he's such a fucking pussy. "Get *up* ."

Eventually he puts his feet under himself, pushes himself up. Gravity seems intent on crushing him. On foot after the other he stumbles back to the car, rubbing at his cheeks and his nose with his wrist, spitting sour saliva on the ground. His knuckles are bleeding and red smears on Hargrove's skin as Steve undoes the handcuffs and the leash, throws them in the back of the car. He helps Hargrove into his sweater, gets him to drink some water - *come on, just a sip, just a little*

bit more, please - even if most of it trickles down his neck. Hargrove groans and closes his eyes again, slumps against his seat.

Steve grabs his shoulder and brings his good hand to cup his jaw. His left cheek is red and slightly puffy where Steve slapped him - *how do you implement correction? Demonstrate, please* - and Steve bites his cheek until it bleeds, because he said that, he did that, he *did* .

“Hargrove?” he calls. Nothing. “Billy?”

Eyelashes flutter and Billy is looking at him, the bottomless black of his pupils eclipsing the blue of his eyes. Steve swallows around the lump in his throat.

“Hey,” he says, trying to smile.

That seems all the encouragement Billy needs to go for Steve’s fingers. Steve knows what it feels like for Hargrove’s mouth to be on his fingers, the heat of his mouth, the slick of his tongue - He knows for all the wrong reasons. Bile chokes him and he pulls his hand away as if burned before Billy can put his mouth on it. He gives a confused look, lips parted, red and shiny, inviting and Steve clenches his teeth until his jaw hurts.

“‘m sorry, I’ll be good.” Billy slurs, head lolling sideways. In the background the beemer engine and Billy’s quiet breathing. In the background the wreck of innocence as Steve knew it.

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Billy sleeps the whole trip back. Steve drives, both hands on the wheel, clutching so tight that by the time they get home his fingers and forearm are cramping.

“Billy?” he calls, quietly, the name soft and liquid in his mouth. Nothing like *Hargrove* . But then the boy slumped in the passenger seat looks nothing like the loud mouthed bully that harassed Steve like it was his god given mission.

Steve goes to touch his shoulder, a moment of hesitation, his fingers hovering but quite not touching - *if I had one like yours I wouldn’t get anything done, I’d have my hands on him all the fucking time* - he

scrunches his eyes shot, shakes the memory out of his head. He shakes Billy awake, gently.

Blue eyes blink open. Even in the semi darkness in the car Steve can see that the pupils have gone back to normal. Billy jerks up, groans, grimaces. “Fuck,” He says, rubs at his mouth, makes a face. “How long was I out for?”

Steve can’t speak, can’t even look at him.

“Harrington?”

He fiddles with the cuff on his coat and can't bring himself to speak. All words are stuck in his throat, a block of concrete. Blabbermouth Harrington, speechless. Go figure.

Out of the coroner of his eye he can see Billy scratch at his jaw. Then his hand reaches out and grabs Steve’s wrist, pulls Steve’s busted hand up into his line of sight.

“Even if I didn’t remember you bruising your knuckles on me, I bet I would feel this.”

Steve swallows.

“Wasn’t you.” He said. “I didn’t punch you. I -“

“Tell me.”

“I can’t.”

“I need to know. And you need to say it.”

Simple as that. Hard as that.

“Look at me. Steve, look at me.” He looks at him. What else can he do. “Say it.”

Steve sighs, rubs his brow.

“Say what, uh?” he snaps, but his voice is empty. It feels like all of his capacity for emotion has been ripped out of him and now there is

only a big gaping wound festering with shame and horror. “That I had you strip down you to your jeans, I bound your arms behind your back then attached a leash on your collar and dragged you all over the compound, like a fucking dog? Made you kneel, made you stand, made you beg.” He swallows. His mouth is parched, he’d kill for a drink. “They asked if I ever activated the collar and I said no of course not because you are a *good boy* . Asked me how I enforce good behavior and I petted you like like a dog, fed you - fucking sugar cubes, made you suck my fingers clean, told them I starved you if you don’t behave. Locked you in your room. And it’s all true, isn’t it?” He laughs but it’s dark and ugly, can’t look at Billy, he can only stand there as he rattles out all the awful things he did - oh god, he *did* - his very own to do list from hell. His fingernails are embedded in the palm of his hands, he’s squeezing his fists so hard, and yet he barely feels that. “They - no - I, *I* grabbed your hair, I slapped you. Twice. What else?” he shrugs. “Discussed with other owners how much fun this whole business is, and have I considered lending you out? Could make good money out of that,” he finishes off with a snort.

“You got me out,” Billy says, shrugs, as if what Steve just said is nothing. *Nothing.*

“Is it?” His voice has become a harsh whisper, gravel and broken glass.

Billy gives him an unreadable look and Steve can’t do this. He needs to get out of the car, away from Billy, away from this easy acquiescence.

But then wherever he goes Billy has to follow. Steve is so fucking stupid.

“Hey,” Billy says, grabs Steve’s arm before he can run upstairs and hide like the coward he is. Steve left the heating on and the house is warm but he feels cold to his bones and can’t stop shivering. “Come on, you know I got worse. I did worse.”

“So what, that makes it okay?” Steve whirls around because can’t Billy? Can’t he see that it’s not okay, Steve is not okay. “Well then, go on. Hit me.”

Billy

Billy doesn't understand. Maybe it's the drugs, making his thoughts sloppy and weak. Harrington is looking at him, eyes wild and desperate and saying things like *hit me* , like he means it, and why would Billy, when Harrignton got him *out* ? He could fucking kiss him. When they stepped into the Centre Billy was so sure they'd fuck up, so sure that the trainers would figure out how soft Harrington is and would intervene. But they didn't. Whatever Harrington did was convincing enough and Billy he so, so grateful.

"Hit you?" Billy frowns because surely he got that wrong. Steve stares, eyes impossibly big, mouth slack. He's been chewing on his lips non stop and they are cherry red, the rest of his face is so pale though, he looks drawn in charcoal and blood. "Why would I hit you?"

"Because - because -" Steve is shaking so badly, like he was after his nightmare and Billy steps in his space. Steve must think that Billy is about to hit him, do as he asks, because he closes his eyes and tilts his face - talk about offering the other cheek. That does something to Billy, something dark and morbid, he pulls his hand back from Steve's arm, fingers twitching in a sort of aftershock.

"This is fucked up, Harrington."

Harrignton eyes blink open, just in time to watch Billy step back. When Billy walks away, he doesn't try to argue with him, doesn't try to stop him.

Harrington needs time, and space, to figure shit out. He's in shock, and it's understandable: most people don't know what the System is really like. But he'll be alright. That's what Billy tells himself as he strips in the bathroom and catches sight of Harrignton's blood smeared on his skin. He didn't say how he bust his hand, and Billy didn't ask. And if he were honest he would say he's scared to find out.

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He doesn't see Harrington again until Monday morning, when it's time to leave for school. Harrington left food and notes in his scrawly handwriting - *if you need this, if you are looking for that* - but he didn't leave his room. Billy heard him take a long shower, late that night, so long that for a while he wondered if Harrington had slipped and died in there.

Didn't hear music, didn't hear the TV. The phone went to voicemail.

Harrington didn't come down to eat but there were no dirty plates or glasses. Billy is not sure that Harrington ate at all.

At 7:30 on Monday he comes down, though, showered and dressed, hair fluffed. He looks like his usual dorky self. He says: "Are you ready?" They get in the car, they pick up curly hair.

Small chat, but the kid keeps glancing at Harrington, asks questions, asks him if he's all right. Harrington hums distractedly, laughs, says: "I might be coming down with something."

God, Harrington is such a good *liar* . And Billy wants to believe him, he wants to, and that's stupid because his life depends on Harrington now so if there's one thing he should care about is whether Harrington is fine or not.

He means to talk to him, now that he put some distance to that day, but Harrington is avoiding him like the plague. Well not really avoiding him, seen as he's stuck with Billy, but whenever Billy tries to talk to him he's swift to laugh it off, change the subject, turning up the radio because *I love this song man.*

But there's no ignoring that Harrington is not well. Billy catches him looking at his way when he thinks Billy is distracted, catches him lying to the brats and even wheeler and Byers with such practiced ease it's concerning.

But Billy knows. There's advantages to being glued to Harrington, if they might be called that. Billy knows he's not eating and he's not sleeping going by the darkening bruises under his eyes. Surviving on Skittles and Diet Coke.

“How long are you going to keep this up for?” Billy says, two weeks later, the moment they drop curly off.

“Keep up what?”

“This. This Stepford Wives charade.” Billy flaps his hand, ineffective. He doesn’t do feelings, he doesn’t know how to do this.

Harrington chuckles, raises an eyebrow.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Billy takes a deep breath, exhales through his nose.

“When was the last time you ate?”

Steve shrugs. “Lunch, today? You should know, you were there.”

“Yeah, I was there and watched you push your food around your plate and not eat a single bite,” Billy grits through his teeth.

“Whatever man,” he says. “It’s not like I’m starving.”

Billy disagrees. Harrington didn’t have much fat to lose in the first place, and his slacks now slip a little lower, showing a pale patch of skin above the hips.

“And you aren’t sleeping either.”

“Uh uh.” He gives a little chuckle. “What are you, my mum?”

“Why, your mum worries about you? I’ve been living with you for almost two months and she hasn’t called once.”

It’s mean but it’s the truth and Billy is losing his patience.

Harrington’s hands tighten on the wheel. Again with the lip chewing.

“Yeah well, at least she doesn’t treat me like a brat.”

“If I wanted to treat you like a brat I’d put you over my knee and teach you a thing or two.”

Billy regrets the words the moment they come out of his mouth. Too late to take them back, when Harrington flashes him a look, licks his lips, a glimpse of pink tongue.

“Yeah? Well, come on then. Teach me.”

Billy shakes his head, tries to clear the anger. What the fuck is Harrington playing at?

“Is that what you want? You want me to hurt you?”

Again Harrington licks his lips. He doesn’t answer but his silence is answer enough.

“Why?”

It’s a simple question, he thinks, but Harrington stays silent for such a long time that Billy thinks he might never answer.

“You wouldn’t understand.” And that’s right. Billy doesn’t understand. He’s been hurt and hurt and *hurt* and he doesn’t understand why Harrington would want this. “It’s all right, don’t sweat it.”

But it’s not all right, it’s *not* . What he thinks must show on his face because the moment Harrington looks at him he offers a placating smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

“You are a good person, Billy Hargrove, underneath all that posturing. Who knew.”

He leaves unsaid the whereas I, but Billy hears it anyway.

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Another week goes by and the Centre calls to confirm the next appointment. Billy is in the kitchen and he hears Harrington cheerfully talking to the receptionist “looking forward to it.”

He doesn’t come to dinner that evening and Billy scrapes his untouched plate in the bin. Again.

He tidies the kitchen and rehearses his little speech in his head.

Hey Harrington, want to watch a movie?

Hey, I'm going stir crazy in your fucking mansion.

Hey, you said you would take care of me.

He goes up to Harrington's room and knocks on the door, doesn't wait to be invited in.

He expected a mess, but Harrington's room is almost sterile. The window is open and the night chill has invaded the space. Harrington is fully dressed, sitting on his bed, back against the headboard. Doing absolutely nothing by the look of it.

Billy blinks, then schools his face into indifference and waves the movie he selected.

"Come on, man, you're supposed to take care of me."

It's manipulative, of course it is, but it never failed Billy before and it doesn't fail him now. Harrington huffs and slides off his bed.

"All right. What you got there?" he grabs the VHS case. " *Grease?* "

"Hey, don't diss Travolta, all right?"

Harrington raises an eyebrow, lips twitching. It's the first real smile Billy has seen on his face since that day at the Centre.

"Sure man, whatever you say."

Billy gets the beers and Harrington makes popcorn - apparently that's the one thing he can make without burning down the kitchen and it's buttery and salty and they fight over the last bits. Billy wins, of course, and Harrington is left sucking the grease off his fingers. Billy mouths goes dry and he takes a gulp of his Buds, some foam spills off the corner of his mouth and down his neck and Harrington snorts and Billy flips him off. Loose with beer on what must be an empty stomach Harrington sings all the Sandy's parts in this pitched, nasal voice, and Billy laughs and joins in.

By the end of the movie Harrington is sprawled on the couch, loose limbed, eyes warm and heavy lidded. Some of the tension on his face has gone and Billy can tell he's moments away from passing out. It makes him wonder how long had it been since he last slept.

"You can't do this, man," Harrington slurs, quietly. Billy waits, holding his breath. "You can't be nice to me." He is rubbing his brow, over and over, as a child primed to cry, and Billy grabs his wrist because he's turning the skin red.

"Hey, stop," he holds Harrington's hand and Harrington is looking at him, eyes raw and hurting, like an open wound. "Come here." He pulls him against his side, blatantly ignoring Harrington's uncoordinated attempt at getting away. He flicks the TV on, there's some *Knight Rider* reruns. "Now hush, I want to watch this."

He really doesn't but Harrington quietens and lets Billy hold him close, like that night. He tries really hard to ignore his old man voice in his head. It's screeching thinks like faggots, pussies, disgrace. But Harrington has done more for him in two months than his old man ever did in Billy's whole life. And Billy is nothing to Harrington. So Billy mentally salutes him with a raised finger, adjusts his grip on Harrington's lax body and settles in for the night.

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The second check up goes as well as expected, going by Harrington's erratic behaviour afterwards. Billy doesn't remember much. The drugs are weird, they heighten his senses and ensure his compliance but lower his capacity to process thoughts, so what he ends up with are disconnected flashes and he's unsure whether things actually happened or he just imagined them. He doesn't say this to Harrington, he's not sure he would appreciate the implications, but while he doesn't remember the exact circumstances he remembers each and every time Harrington hands are on him, as if each touch, no matter how fleeting, is etched into his skin. And yes, Harrington hurt him a couple of times, open handed slaps to the face that are more humiliation than sting. While under the influence he thinks of Neil, he thinks he fucked up, that he deserves this and worse. Afterwards, he'll rationalise that Harrington doesn't know much about Neil, wasn't really punishing him, and slapping him would be

the least Harringont could do to satisfy the trainers. It's fucked up, but it's the way it is.

Harrington asked that one time: is this you?

Billy lied. There's no *him* anymore. Whoever Billy was before, it's gone. He can only keep moving forward, one day at a time, hoping he'll get out, that Harrington will get him out. And Harrington is trying. He doesn't have to run his fingers between Billy's shoulder, down his flanks, on his arms. Billy couldn't swear on it, but he believes most of these touches are not driven by the trainers. No, this is Harrington's way of checking on him, getting him through this. And maybe it's the drugs, maybe it's misplaced gratitude or that thing Wheeler's mentioned, *traumatic bonding* , but if each good boy out of Harrignton's mouth fills him with sparks and sunshine, is it that bad? Harrington has a way of saying it, not at all syrupy and dark. It's barely a whisper, hesitant and like a question. Like he's asking Billy. And Billy thinks yes yes *yes* and nuzzles into Harrington's hand, rubs his cheek against his thigh, sucks his fingers because that's what he's supposed to do, what the drugs want him to do and what, he suspects, underneath it all, he, Billy, wants to do.

Steve

"God, look at him, he's hard. You must have the magic touch, man."

Steve bites his tongue so hard he draws blood, forces out a dark chuckle.

"Yes, well, I suspect it's more to do with the drugs than with me."

"Still, he's keen isn't he? You fucked him yet?"

Steve stares at Billy, and he hopes his hesitation will pass for consideration. Billy is on his knees, head in Steve's lap, broad sun kissed expanse of his back radiating heat under Steve's fingers. His eyes are unfocused and his mouth is slightly open, red and soft. His tongue pokes out to lick at chapped lips. Steve is petting his hair and Billy is making these little noises, like Nancy used to make when

Steve would eat her out and god how fucked up it is. And yes, Billy's jeans hide nothing of the hard on he's sporting and Steve's cock twitches and he swallows panic and bile because Billy is out of it, the fucker next to Steve in the training room is discussing him like a piece of meat and Steve is getting hard. Jesus Christ, what's wrong with him?

Steve's back is covered in cold sweat and his stomach is twisted like it will never uncoil again, like it's eating itself out.

"Nah," he says and his voice comes out as if from a distance. "I don't swing that way."

Liar liar pants on fire! A tiny little voice cackles in his head.

The guy next to him snorts. "A hole is a hole, man. I'd tap that. Bet it's super tight."

Steve laughs because that's what he's supposed to do. He's not supposed to look at the girl at the douchebag's feet. She's got bruises around her mouth and a vacant look that goes beyond the drugs.

"Good point. Might consider it in time of need."

The douchebag snorts and pulls the girl closer, the trainers come in. On with the show.

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This time he doesn't throw up. This time he doesn't get sucked into a dark dark place where he's scared he's going to stay forever.

This time he helps Billy in the passenger seat, frees his arms, helps him get dressed, puts his seat belt on, offers him some watered down Gatorade from the flask he stashed in the car that morning.

He checks he's comfortable, as comfortable as he can be, and drives them back to Hawkins.

And all the while nausea pools in his stomach and everything looks grey and distant as if Steve's stuck in a mist. He drives and his brain only supplies turn left, turn right, signal here, exit there. Beyond that,

he can't think, he can't feel. He's like he's not even in his own body. He floats.

Somehow they get home and Billy is still out of it. He helps him to his bed, takes off his boots, puts a glass of water on the nightstand, a comforter over the still form. He watches himself do these things with an odd sense of detachment. It's fascinating, really.

Then he goes to his room, sits on the bed, stares at the wall until the pattern blurs and grey dots swim in his vision and he's not even sure his eyes are still open.

He must fall asleep at some point because when he comes to himself next he's laying on his side.

He's hard and he's warm and his thoughts are slow and shapeless, little clouds swept around by the summer breeze. He sighs, snuggles in his pillow and reaches down to unbutton his slacks. God, it's been a while. Just the brush of his hand as he pulls his briefs down, tucks them under his balls, has his cock stand to attention. He licks the palm of his hand, once, twice, grips the shaft and pumps it, nice and slow. He's primed for it, he doesn't even have to imagine anything specific and he's leaking. Just maybe a mouth wrapped around his cock. Yeah, that. He runs the pad of his thumb over the wet slit, like a tongue would. Bites his lips to keep a moan in. What if Billy is awake? God Billy. He knows what his mouth feels like on his fingers, a sharper memory than Nancy's mouth on his cock.

No , he thinks, *don't think of that* but it's playing white elephant.

A hole is a hole , his brain supplies and he bites his tongue because he doesn't want to think of that, he doesn't want to think of Billy but now he can't stop - god, he can't stop and it's Billy's mouth on his cock, red lips wrapped around the shaft, nice and tight, hot slick tongue dabbing at the tip, teasing. Steve's hand would grab at those curls, soft, so soft, and would urge Billy to take him deeper. And Billy would, wouldn't he? Do anything, anything, even choke on it - *look at me* , Steve would say and those impossibly blue eyes would meet his own, wet and blown. *Good boy* , Steve would say.

That's what does it. Steve comes harder than he has ever before, he

comes hating himself like he couldn't believe was possible. The orgasm is blinding, a punch in the gut, leaves him gasping and nauseous. The aftermath is pure horror.

He breathes and breathes but there's nothing stopping the tide, each shudder, each heartbeat, threatening to drown him.

You think I'd do that?

That was him, all earnestness and disbelief. That was him before he did what he's just done.

Nancy was right. How did he ever think he could own Billy and be good. He's not good. Maybe he's never been. All he's been telling Dustin and Nancy and Max all he's been promising Billy. It's just bullshit. This Steve, the one he thought he could turn himself into, is just bullshit. What's real is the worst part of himself and he doesn't know what to do with it.

Notes for the Chapter:

Further triggers

SPOILERS

Billy and Steve need to go to a check up at the Centre and pretend they are in a "proper" owner/ companion relationship. In this context Steve slaps Billy. Billy is drugged by the trainers.

Steve has a hard time coping so he has troubles eating and sleeping. Also, some dissociation.

Well, how was that? Let me know what you think. I'd like to say it gets better but it will only get worse... There will be a happy ending, though, so hang in there! :)

5. Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

> It's been a while, but here is an 8k chapter to make up for the wait. This chapter is - intense. I would really love to hear what you make of it.
>
> We start earning those tags folks, so check them again as I update them as I add the chapters and as always, proceed with caution. If you think I have missed anything, do let me know asap. I'll list triggers at the end of the chapter too. If you want to check what's in the chapter before reading, you can find me on tumblr.
> I am taking a break from social media, hence the radio silence, but I will be checking DMs and Asks.
>
> And with this we are more than halfway there - phew. This story is - I honestly don't know anymore how I ended up writing this.
>
> As always, the chapter is unbetaed. I did my best to edit it, but I'm sure it would benefit from a proper beta. Maybe once I've finished posting this whole thing I'll ask someone to help me polish it.
>
> Next update in a month time - things are about to get ugly again. Well, uglier.
>
> Enjoy?

Steve

It's not that Billy is a man - that's the least of his problems, not even a blip on the radar. Steve still remembers telling his mum in fifth grade that when he grew up, he'd marry Tommy H. His mum told him that no, he *wouldn't* and they all promptly pretended it never happened. The Harringtons' preferred coping mechanism.

So, no, it's not that Billy is a man. And besides Steve is quite sure that he still likes girls too, the way he wonders what could have been every time he sees Nancy.

The problem is that, given the circumstances, he's pretty sure that even thinking of Billy in that way makes him a monster.

Now the right thing to do would be to avoid him. And Steve tries. He tries to stay away, limit interaction, but the thing is, they are stuck together. On top of that Billy seems to have made it his mission to keep an eye on Steve, so avoiding him is next to impossible. Avoiding his touch, same thing, because Billy is as physical as they come. God, he was in Steve's face all the time when he hated his guts, now that he has decided that Steve needs looking after? It's a hundred times worse.

Every touch is devious torture. Steve wants it and wants it and *wants it* . He also knows he doesn't deserve Billy's concern: Billy wouldn't give a fuck about him if he weren't wearing that collar, never mind appreciate Steve's disgusting thoughts. No. What Steve deserves is Billy punching him in the face, hard. He thought he deserved it for what he did to Billy at the centre. And okay, that was because he had to, but still, it was not okay, really not okay. This, this though, is all on Steve. He can't blame it on the centre, the trainers, their fucked up situation. He didn't have to get off on this, no one made him - not the way they could make Billy do anything.

And if Billy knew - god, the thought makes Steve's throat seize up.

But Billy doesn't know so he keeps checking on Steve, pushing food in his face, insisting they watch some stupid movie together.

Steve makes excuses. He doesn't fall asleep on the couch anymore: "need my bed, man, my back hurts." He sits next to Nancy when they have lunch, and eats everything, even if he'll throw it all up again afterwards. He keeps his hands in his pockets as they walk down the halls, so that their knuckles don't accidentally brush together.

He does all he can, and it's all for nothing, Billy is always there, and when he's not there, he's on Steve's mind, in his dreams. Dreams that leave him breathless and scared and so, so hard.

Soon enough Billy starts giving him these weird glances and Steve thinks, he knows, he knows, oh god, he *knows* .

And now even Jonathan is giving him strange looks. So Steve swallows a mouthful of the pasta he can't taste and deflects: "Heard Jenny is throwing a party on Friday. Thought maybe, I don't know, we could check it out?"

Nancy immediately frowns but Jonathan tilts his head and touches her arm. "Could be fun," he shrugs. "Life's short."

Billy snorts at that and Steve has to ask. "You up to it?"

Billy pauses, as if he hadn't considered being asked. "Why not?" he says then and winks, all blue eyes and red lips and Steve feels the flush creeping up the back of his neck while his stomach ties itself in knots. "Great," he murmurs. "It's a date, then."

Billy laughs at the poor choice of words and there's no hiding Steve's flushed face, so he ducks his head and stabs another piece of pasta wishing he could stab his disgusting thoughts instead.

Billy

Why the fuck did he agree to this? The party is loud and wild but Billy would rather be home. Well, Harrington's. He doesn't have a home, never really did. A dark haired girl presses herself against his side. He links an arm around her waist and pulls her closer. He can see the looks that some of their classmates are giving them. Looks that say, wait, isn't Hargrove King Steve's bitch?

Hagan made sure that rumour got around - not that anyone dared bother them. Billy has a reputation and Steve, well, he's Steve.

Still, this party might suck but could be a good opportunity to murk the waters. Billy has done this how many times before, now? He knows very well that as long as people are given juicy bits of gossip, they'll turn a blind eye to the obvious - such as the scarf ever present around Billy's neck. The girl - Sandra? Kendra? - is eyeing it as they speak and Billy can see the wheels turning in her pretty head.

“What’s the deal with Harrington?” she asks. “Is it true that he’s a biter?”

Billy hums, pulls her closer, until she’s straddling his thigh. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

She raises a styled eyebrow as Billy’s hand slips lower, cupping her ass through her flimsy skirt.

She narrows her eyes but doesn’t tell him to fuck off.

“Thought you guys batted for the same team.”

Billy smiles, the smile he’s practiced at least a thousand times in front of a mirror, in front of random girls. He squeezes her asscheek just right, pushes his thigh more firmly between her legs and her strawberry mouth goes *oh* .

“I see how people would think that,” he breathes against her neck. She grinds against him, he nips at her throat and gets a full body shudder for his effort. “But the truth is, King Steve and I have learnt to share.” Billy gives her a meaningful look and watches as makes up the unsaid, fills the blanks with something she will tell her all of her friends come tomorrow. “And Harrington has this big empty house all to himself so he can, you know, accommodate more demanding get-togethers.”

The girl’s ass is warm and solid under his hand and he too can imagine grinding into her - with Harrington. She’s short, and he would tug at Harrington’s hair, hold his head just right, kiss him deep and filthy over her shoulder. That’s all it takes to get him hard. He tugs the girl closer, makes her feel it against her hip. She giggles.

“D’you wanna get out of here?”

He smirks. “Thought you’d never ask.”

They fuck in a room upstairs, the parents’ bedroom by the looks of it, Billy taking her from behind, skirt up, panties just shoved to the side. He strokes her clit as he fucks into her nice and steady. It’s the least he can do given that he’s not really there with her. Someone said that a hole is a hole, he can’t really remember who, but they might have a

point. Especially if it is attached to someone with dark hair, the colour of melted chocolate. In any case Sandra? Brenda? Is having a good time going by the sounds she's making and the *oh god, there, right there* . And then her pussy is clenching hard around his cock. Billy closes his eyes, grabs both hips with his hands and fucks her through it.

That's when the door barges open.

"Hey!" The girl yells while Billy pulls out, rips the condom off his still hard dick, drops it on the floor for someone else to clean up.

Tommy and Carol are staring, not at all concerned with the eyeful they are getting.

Carol recovers first, blatantly staring at his erection: "Want me to help with that?" She offers with a smirk.

Tommy snorts and manhandles her into the room. The other girl adjusts her skirt, gets off the bed, "Excuse me, we weren't done," she huffs.

"You saving it for Harrignton?" Tommy jibes with a creepy leer. Billy rolls his eyes. God, Hagan has it bad for Harrington. Billy, of all people, can relate - still, it's fucking annoying.

Billy tugs his jeans up his hips and stalks over to Tommy. To his credit, Hagan stands his ground, even as his eyes squirrel to the door.

"Nah," Billy says and steals the cigarette from Tommy's lips, takes a drag, blows it in his face. "Saving it for you, sweetheart. Saw you staring at it."

Carol laughs and Tommy colours: "Fuck off," he says and pushes at Billy's chest. He doesn't gain an inch. Carol has more sense, she pulls on Tommy's wrist, drags him away. "Come on, you're no fun. Tracey here said she was not done. Wanna join us, darling?"

Tracey seems tempted. Go figure.

"How about you, Billy? The more the merrier?"

“Wouldn’t want Tommy to get distracted.”

Carol shrugs as she loses her knickers. Jeez, that girl is a menace.

“Suit yourself,” she said and pulls Tracey down for a filthy kiss. Billy watches because, well, he can still appreciate things like that. Sex is sex. Tracey pulls back first, cheeks red, mouth wet - eyes warm and dazed. Maybe Harrington’s eyes are like that when he’s all worked up.

Tommy is on her next and Carol saunters over to steal his cigarette back.

“You might want to check on your boy, though. Wasn’t looking too hot.” She exhales the smoke to the ceiling, taps the ashes on the ugly bottle green carpet. “Oh, and try not kill anyone, all right?”

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Carol’s warning makes sense the moment Billy finds Harrington. Because he does want to kill someone, namely the random guy fucking Harrington’s mouth.

“What the fuck?”

That’s Billy's first thought. No, that’s not him, that’s the guy when Billy slams the bathroom door open. Billy can’t think, he can’t think because Harrington is giving head in a pink coordinated bathroom. But then Harrington is not looking too happy about it, eyes dazed, lashes clumped together with tears, cheeks blotchy. Must be the guy’s fist in his hair, pulling too hard, or that vicious thrust of hips. Harrington makes a sound like he’s choking and Billy loses it. He grabs the guy by his sweaty, thick neck and slams him head first into the wall.

“Get the fuck out,” he growls and the guy doesn’t need Billy to repeat himself, too busy holding a busted nose. That leaves him and Harrington and he’s at a loss, he’s just not prepared for this.

He can only stare at Harrington, who's blinking stupidly still on his knees on a stupid bathmat, mouth parted, lips red and shiny as if still waiting for - he coughs once, twice, sniffles, swallows.

Billy stares, uncomprehending as Harrington scrubs at his mouth and looks away, until "Uhm," Harrington huffs, and gives a little nervous laugh. "You were looking for me?" It sounds weird, slurred, like Harrington is drunk or stoned.

Billy is speechless. He's rarely speechless.

He grabs Harrington by the arm, and tries to ignore the way Harrington flinches before he just lets Billy hoist him up.

"Let's get you home," Billy says, because now that he can speak he can't trust himself to not say anything he would regret. So he keeps his hand on Harrington like a clamp, steers him through the party, the front lawn, to where the Beemer is parked down the road.

"Keys," he snaps, then, because Harrington can't walk straight, never mind drive. Once Billy helps him in the passenger seat he folds his arms over his stomach, and Billy can see his hands shaking even as Harrington pretends to stare out the passenger window at the big black nothing outside.

Billy drives and tries not to think, not yet, tries to focus on the Beemer. God, it's a sweet ride but he can't enjoy it properly, not with his mind full of disbelief and worry and something he can't quite name, something like betrayal, like Harrington should have told him he sucks cock.

It's preposterous. What the hell would have Billy done with the info anyway? Sat down with Harrington and told him, *I do too?*

He snorts at the thought and out of the corner of his eyes he can see Harrington flinch.

"Are you okay?" He finds himself asking, because he can't tell. He can't tell anything anymore with Harrington. He thought he understood the guy, rich, straight, too sweet and soft for his own good, everything easy and planned out. Never a cloud in his big blue

Indiana sky.

And now Harrington goes and throws him for a loop.

The nightmares and the bat should have given it away, because what the fuck. The thinly veiled self esteem issues. The utter *loneliness* .

“Harrington?”

“Stop the car,” Harrington blurts and Billy can at least recognize that tone of voice, the desperation in it. He slams on the brakes and the car hasn’t even come to a stop when Harrington pushes the door open and throws up, just leaning out, half strangled by the seat belt.

Billy rubs at his eyes and waits, motor running, as Harrington empties his stomach. It’s the sour tang of the mystery punch that gives it away - Billy grimaces, that stuff is bad going down and worse coming up.

Eventually, Harrington leans back in his seat with a groan, slams the door shut, rubs his sleeve at his mouth over and over until his lips look too resHe’s pale and shaky, sweat beading his brow.

“Better?”

Harrington doesn’t reply. Billy raises an eyebrow, waits.

“Just - drive,” Harrington pleads, eyes closed and voice hoarse. Billy drives.

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Eventually he gets Harrington to shower, put on some clean clothes, brush his teeth and swill some mouthwash because urgh, *puke* .

Eventually he manhandles him to the couch and makes him some tea. Talk about domestic.

“What did you take?”

Harrington blinks. He’s holding his steaming mug, knuckles white, and Billy doesn’t know how he’s not burning his hands.

“What do you mean?”

“Drugs, what did you take?” He repeats, slowly. “Are you going to OD on me?”

Harrington snorts. “I didn’t take anything, just had a beer, some punch.”

“Right. So that douchebag slipped you something then.”

“What?” A frown. “No.”

Billy gives him a look. Harrington shakes his head, goes for one of those smiles of him, placating, fake.

“Look, I’m fine. Just a bit tipsy.”

“Tipsy doesn’t get you into dick.”

Harrington blinks again. “Oh.” It’s like a bubble of hurt popping out of his mouth. “ *That* .”

He grimaces and scrubs his lips again and all of a sudden all Billy can see is them wrapped around a cock. His cock. Jesus Christ, not now. He clenches his teeth, hard, takes a deep breath.

“Yeah, that.”

“That was a mistake.”

Billy snort. “A mistake?”

Harrington shrugs. Like he doesn’t care. Of course he doesn’t. He’s an idiot. Billy pinches the bridge of his nose. “What the fuck, man? Have you lost your mind?”

“Just thought I’d see what it’s like,” Harrington waves a hand, looks away. “You know.”

“No, I really fucking don’t. Do you - like that guy?

Harrington looks at him then, square in the eyes and maybe it was simpler when Billy was fresh out of the centre and couldn’t meet his gaze. But he can now, and he does, and Harrington is giving him this look, as if Billy had been the one on his knees, a random guy’s cock forced down his throat - until Harrington snort, his mouth twists in a fucked up smile. “God, no.”

Billy stills.

“Did he - did he make you?” And there’s bile and anger rising in his throat and he’ll need to find the guy again and make him wish a busted nose was all he’d get.

Harrington is silent for a very long time, until there’s cold sweat pooling down Billy’s spine and his heart is in his mouth and he’s this close to start breaking things, training be damned. “No,” he says, eventually. “No, I - you wouldn’t understand.”

“Well, fucking try me.”

Harrington sighs, finally takes a sip of his tea.

“People at the centre. They keep talking about stuff they do to - those like you. Stuff they’d do to you if I let them, that I should want to do to you. And I - I needed to see what that would feel like, what if feels like to have do that when you don’t want to.”

For a moment Billy thinks Harrington must have activated the collar because he can’t move. He can’t breathe. There’s just this noise in his ears, like a buzz, and he can’t even think.

Maybe a few second pass, maybe an eternity. Billy can’t tell. But eventually he swallows and says: “You’re right, I don’t fucking understand. Why would you do that?”

Harrington is rubbing his brow now,again and again, the way he does when he’s about to lose it.

“Because I need to *know* ,” he snaps, hand cutting between them. “Don’t you see? I need to know because they think it’s fine, it’s all

fine, fucking peachy and it's not, it's really not, it's -" he's hyperventilating now, eyes filled with tears.

"Hey," Billy pries Harrington's fingers off the mug, he's shaking so bad hot tea is sloshing on his hand and all over the floor

"I needed to know," Harrignton blurts out through panicked breaths, fingers grabbing at Billy's shirt, twisting the fabric looking for something to hold on to. "Because I've done things to you and they say it's fine, you say it's fine," and there's an accusation in his voice, or maybe a plea. "And I don't know anymore. I don't know if I can tell what's right and what's wrong, anymore, if I can do what's right, if I'd even want to." He closes his eyes and Billy doesn't know what to say. He places a hand on Steve's cheek, just holding, grounding. Steve's breath hitches, then he turns his head and before Billy can move away Steve's lips are on his fingers and then his fingers are in Steve's mouth. Once more Billy stops breathing, thinking. There's only the slick hot drag of Steve's tongue on his skin and fuck he loves it and he hates it, because he's all he ever wanted but for all the wrong reasons. And Steve is watching him, lips wrapped around his fingers he's watching him with those eyes and Billy is thinking I did this to him, I did this to him. Billy wrenches his fingers free, leans back, doesn't know what to do with the hand whose fingers were in Steve's mouth.

"Don't you want to know? What would you do if you were me," Steve says. And he slides off the couch, he kneels between Billy's legs then and there and looks up, the dark of his eyes unreadable.

"What's this?" Billy exhales. "Are you -" He swallows, tries to hold on to something that makes sense and settles for anger. That has never failed him before. "Mocking me?"

Steve watches him, hands clenching and unclenching on his thighs, kneeling at Billy's feet. Billy can't imagine what thoughts must run through his head, he can't imagine that what happened at the centre, no matter how fucked up, could warp Harrington like this. And there's the horror of having him do so deliberately what Billy has no choice about doing.

He can't.

Billy can't. He stumbles to his feet and leaves the room, Steve, without a look back, without a word.

Steve

He kneels for a long time, until his knees hurt and his back goes stiff. Then he kneels some more.

Billy left. Of course he did. Steve is a fucking mess, why would Billy want to have anything to do with him.

He wonders if he falls asleep like this or if he's just gone for a while. He comes back to warm arms around him, pulling him up, up, up.

"Harrington," it's Billy and he sounds scared. "Come on, get up. What are you doing still here? Get up, please."

Of course. Anything Billy says, if only his legs would work. He tries and tries and eventually manages to put them under himself.

"You are scaring me, man," Billy says and that won't do. Steve doesn't want Billy to be scared, even though Steve is a monster.

"I'm okay," Steve says, because that's what Billy needs to hear, isn't it? He doesn't need to hear that Steve is not okay, that Steve is losing it - because if they mention this to anyone and it goes back to the centre Billy will be taken away. Fuck, Steve is really a fucking pussy, he just needs to get through six months of this shit and here he is, breaking down after two and he's not the one wearing a collar and being slapped around. "I just - I just need to sleep it off."

"Yeah, yeah, okay," Billy sounds so relieved Steve doesn't feel too bad for lying, again. He helps Steve upstairs, in his bed then just stands there, looking at Steve from the door, the light from the hallway framing him.

The lights in Steve's room are off and if Billy closes the door he'll be left in the dark and he can't, not tonight, he can't - he reaches for the torch on the nightstand and Billy frowns and takes a step forward, stops. Steve stops too, torch in one hand, breath in his lungs, watches

Billy set his face slips in bed next to him. Steve gapes.

“Shut up,” Billy growls as tugs the torch out of his hand and puts it back on the nightstand. He adjusts his pillow, turns off the light and rolls to one side. He left the light in the hallway on and Steve he’s so grateful - until Billy loops an arm around his waist and pulls Steve closer, spooning him, body flush against body. Steve stays very, very still, his heart beating out of his chest, mouth dry. His body craves this, the baser, needier part of him has been starved of this for a long time, the proximity of another human being. The other him, the darker him wonders at what turn events could take, how easy it would be to roll over Billy, slot their bodies together, grind into the other. And him, what he likes to think of as Steve, he’s scared Billy will know, he’s disgusted he could even think that, embarrassed that he’s weak enough to need to be held like this. Behind him, Billy breath quietens, across his waist his arm goes lax. He’s asleep. Steve instead, stays awake, eyes open in the semidarkness.

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He jerks awake and his first instinct is to roll off the bed, grab the bat, strike. But there’s an arm around his chest, warm, solid. Steve goes to escape the hold but the arm tightens then another joins it, they trap him, hold him, ground him. Heat against his back, seeping through his t-shirt. It’s warm, not cold, he’s warm and that gives him pause. A puff of breath at the nape of his neck, hot, like the hand now splayed on his chest, on his beating heart, each finger a reassurance.

He’s held as the aftershocks of what woke him bleed away. He can’t remember the last time he has been held. And none held him since his last encounter with the upside down. He closes his eyes and melts into it, his tiredness suddenly unbounded, overwhelming. He closes his eyes and thinks he might never open them again, he’s *so* tired.

“Shh,” the sound comes soothing, reverberating in his ear all the way to his panicked brain. “I’ve got you, pretty boy.”

Only then he realizes he's whimpering, shaking. It's Billy. God, Billy. Steve shouldn't, but Billy's arms won't release him. He can then soak up the heat, the weight, revel in the confines of this human cage, he, who's always untethered, on the verge of shaking apart. Just for a while longer, he can let himself be held together.

"This isn't just me, is it?" It's not a question, not really. Steve stares at the semidarkness, the faint glow from the light in the hallway. He hasn't talked about this ever and now he doesn't know he'd be able to.

"What happened to you?" This, this is the question, the question Steve has been waiting for from his parents, his teachers, his friends. The question that never came, until now, until Billy Hargrove of all people. Go figure.

The words just burst out of him, a dam breaking.

"A girl died," he says, his voice foreign to himself. "Her name was Barb. Everyone was told that it was a chemical leak."

He pauses, breathes, waits for the panic. It doesn't come. He breathes some more Billy's hand on his chest raising and dropping with it.

"It wasn't. She died here, in my pool. A - a monster got her."

He swallows, waits for Billy to start questioning him, to start laughing, call him crazy. That doesn't come either so he takes yet another shaky breath and resumes his tale, his confession.

"It almost got Nancy and Jonathan at that time. And a year later it went after the kids. And both times I - I fought it." He laughs now, saying it aloud. Him, fighting monsters. Seems like a joke, his nightmares now starring a different type of horror.

"The bat," Billy says. "That time at Byers."

Steve hums, and it seems enough for Billy. He squeezes his eyes shut and pushes through the last of his words, his half truths.

"I was scared out of my mind, but it didn't matter because I knew what I had to do. Help Nancy, keep the kids safe. So that's what I did.

But now - now I don't know what to do. I don't know how to fight a monster when the monster is me."

There are tears leaking out of his eyes, and he only realises when the pillow grows wet under his cheek.

Billy stays silent for a long time.

"I know monsters. I lived with one my whole life." Billy says then, his breath shaky behind Steve's ear, his voice cold. "You aren't one."

"Billy," Steve pleads. *If you knew, oh if you knew* , he thinks but can't say, the words stuck in his throat.

"Listen to me." Billy swallows, sighs, sounds like he's pulling the words out with steel hooks gritting. He grabs Steve's hand and brings it to the soft skin of his forearm, guides Steve's fingers to trace pebble like grooves. "You wouldn't put out a cigarette on my arm and laugh and call me pussy when I cry because it hurts so fucking bad. And then do it again until I learn to take it like a real man, not the faggot I am," He laughs because that's how he copes.

Steve goes completely still under the sheer horror of it. His fingers can't stop tracing the scars, that's what they are, gently, so gently.

Billy just breathes for a long time.

"I never told anyone," he huffs. "I'm telling you now because I want you to understand. What you have to do to me, is wrong. I know. And I also know that if you could get me out in any other way, you would. Hell, if there was another way, I would have never asked it of you because it's killing you." Billy shifts, tightens his hold. "God, if I weren't such a pussy, I would have never asked you in the first place. But I have so I'm telling you now, this is not you, this is because of me, because of those bastards. You should just let me go. What's the point anyway? We both know that I'm never getting out, not until I live, and I'm only dragging you down with me."

Steve works his jaw, his teeth clenched together so hard he struggles to form the words.

"No fucking way," he growls. "You hear me? No fucking way."

“Steve,” Billy signs.

“I could never live with myself.”

“But you are asking me to live with this.” Billy bites out, harsh. “With you self- destructing because of me.”

“It’s not *you* -“

Billy shifts and Steve finds himself pinned under him, Billy’s solid weight on him, his hands on his wrist pinning them to the pillow either side of his head. Steve stared at his eyes, eerily blue in the pool glow.

“Then tell me why you got on your knees for that guy, then.” He growls. “The truth this time.”

Steve closes his eyes, bites his lips, shakes his head.

“Don’t,” he begs.

“Tell me it has nothing to do with me,” Billy squeezes his wrists. It doesn’t hurt but it tells Steve he’s not going anywhere. “Look me in the eye and tell me you didn’t do that because of me and I’ll let it go.”

Steve freezes because he can lie, god know he can, but with Billy peering into his eyes it’s another matter entirely. He shakes his head, bucks, but Billy is unmovable.

“Billy, please.”

“Tell me,” he hisses. “It’s obviously killing you, so either you tell me, or I’m out of here.”

And Steve knows that Billy is stubborn enough, crazy enough that he would, he would run off even if that would activate the collar and bring a shitstorm to Steve’s porch.

“I thought of doing it to you, all right?” he barks. “What I let that guy do to me. I thought of you on your knees, for me, and me fucking your face and I came, hard. Harder than I’ve come in ages.” He

laughs, then ugly and unhinged. “Go on then, tell me I’m not a monster, now.”

Billy lets his wrists go and Steve covers his face with his hands. He presses down hard, as if squeezing a thorn out of a wound, as if he could make himself disappear. For a moment he doesn’t even realise that Billy is pulling him up, closer, holding him, again.

“How can you stand to touch me?” He asks because he honestly doesn’t know.

“I’d do nothing but touch you, pretty boy,” Billy says. “The moment I first laid eyes on you, I wanted you. Thought you knew. Thought you weren’t that way. Then I saw you with that guy and thought you weren’t that way with me.”

Steve swallows, hard, but fingers card through his hair and he doesn’t want to move away from that.

“See what I’m saying?” Billy clears his throat. “I’d get on my knees and show you right now, if I didn’t know that it would fuck you up even worse. You’d start thinking I’m doing this because of this fucking collar or because I think I owe you or who knows what? So, I’ll do this instead, okay?” Billy bucks up and there’s no mistaking the hard line of his cock against Steve’s hip and Steve gasps and groans. Then Billy’s mouth is on his, open, wet, hungry. He kisses Steve as if he were starving or maybe it’s Steve that’s starving, because moans and licks into that velvet heat, desperate for more.

Billy breaks the kiss with a growl, hands on Steve’s shoulders.

“God, pretty boy, need to stop now or I won’t be able to stop at all. The things I’d do to you.” Steve is hard and he needs but he knows, he knows that if they do this now, with Billy wearing a collar and Steve holding the leash, it will fuck them up for good. He nods and Billy cups Steve’s cheeks, rubs his thumb at his swollen lips. Steve parts his lips, waits, hopes anyway because he was never good at thinking things through. Billy chuckles and pulls his hand away. “Four months.” He promises. “Four months and we’ll pick up where we left off, okay? But we both have to make it, you hear me?”

Steve nods. Of course. Anything for this, for Billy.

“Fours months,” he agrees, voice hoarse with need when he realizes Billy is waiting.

“Now let’s get some sleep.”

Billy

God, Harrington. *Steve* . Wheeler is an idiot. The problem isn’t that he doesn’t think, the problem is he thinks too much.

Thought of you on your knees.

Drives him crazy that thinking of Billy that way, made Steve so unbalanced that he had to go and - Billy can’t think of that, can’t think of Steve like that - so lost and scared that he thought he needed to get to his knees for some kind of fucked up penance.

Fuck. Billy is an idiot. He hadn’t realised that Steve had baggage. And apparently a shitload of it. He thought he was a well adjusted rich boy that never had to question anything, that didn’t have to dwell too deep on right and wrong. But Steve he - he’s warped, just like Billy, if for different reasons. And that only makes him want more. Because maybe Steve can understand.

I’m fucked up too , he had said and Billy didn’t believe him. But he does now. He doesn’t understand everything he told him, he won’t pretend to because, well, *monsters* , but he believes him.

So he holds him tighter. Harrington is out like a light, his fingers on Billy’s scars, gentle. Billy holds him and promises himself he’ll never let go.

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“I feel like pancakes. And doing shit nothing all day. Maybe get Max to come around for a movie, if she can get out of the house.”

Steve rubs at a bleary eye and hums

“Sounds good,” he says, then presses his face back into his pillow. “I don’t feel like doing much either,” he mumbles, sleepy.

Billy shakes his head, and gets out of bed, a smile tugging at his lips for the first time in a long time.

“Billy,” Steve calls. He looks lost in his big bed, dark eyes soft in the morning light hair sticking in every direction. “Are we okay?”

Billy could lie. “We will be,” he says what he hopes for. “Just - talk to me, all right?”

Steve joins him in the kitchen not long later, toweling his hair and wearing a faded t-shirt and soft looking sweatpants. His face looks relaxed for once and he steals a pancake, stuffs half in his mouth, moans. Billy wants to kiss him.

So he crowds Harrington agaisnt the counter, catches his eyes and says: “I want to kiss you. Can I?”

Harrington looks away, his cheeks cherry red. He nods.

“But do you want me to?” Billy insists because Steve’s mind can be a scary place. “You have to tell me.”

“Yeah,” Steve says. “Kiss me. Please.” God, all nice and proper. Billy kisses him then. Nice and slow, chasing the taste of maple syrup on Steve’s tongue. Steve lets out this little breathy sigh, Billy swallows that too.

“Why are you so nice to me?” Steve says after. “I do nothing but fuck up.”

Billy stares because he can’t believe that Steve doesn’t know that no one ever cared for Billy the way that Steve does. And Steve doesn’t even realize he cares.

Billy knows that Steve wouldn't believe anything he says, though, so he kisses him again and again until he's panting and dazed and hard. Four months, Billy thinks. If the centre won't kill them, blue balls will.

"Come on, breakfast is getting cold," he says.

Afterwards, they snuggle on the couch. Thing is Billy has always been physical, it's the way he's wired or something. But growing up with Neil meant that the only touch he could get was either laced with pain or a rushed intimacy of the wrong kind. Since his mum left there were no hugs, no snuggling, no revelling in someone else's warmth. Billy knows he's touch starved. That's why some of the shit they pulled at the centre threw him, because he wanted it, he wanted a hand in his hair, scratching at his scalp, petting him.

He wanted to be told he is good - a good boy, good for something. And Steve is the same. It doesn't take a genius to see that the guy is touch starved too. In the time Billy has been here, Steve's human interactions have been limited to his curly haired friend, Wheeler and Byers. His parents haven't shown up, nevermind picked up the phone. Billy suspected Steve was touch starved the first time they sat on the couch and he pulled Steve against his side and the guy just melted. They don't acknowledge it with words, but Billy puts on *scooby doo* reruns and Steve plasters himself against this side once more and they just are. The morning melts away like the last of the snow between another cup of coffee and the morning news, and Billy's fingers his Steve's hair and Steve's cheek on his chest. At some point they doze off, and when Steve wakes up, eyes soft like velvet, slightly disoriented, Billy captures his coffee laced mouth in another kiss and Steve just sighs and yields and god, that's beyond what Billy ever dreamed of, someone that would just take the storm that he is.

He suspects that Steve would let him, would take anything Billy could dish out and more. But not now, not while chance is he would do it because of some misguided sense of owing Billy. No, Billy wants Steve to want it. So it will have to wait.

Four months. Four fucking months. And maybe longer than that, as long as Steve needs to know that Billy wants him for him - and to figure out that he wants Billy too. If that's the case. Because it might

not be. Steve might be in this because he thinks he owes Billy. That sours the kiss and Billy pulls away. Steve frowns.

“You know we don’t have to do any of this if you don’t want to.”

Steve gives him a heated look then seeks Billy’s mouth. “I want to,” he breathes on his lips. Billy nips at them, pulls always again, watches as Steve’s pink tongue darts on his bottom lip, chases the taste of him. God.

“I mean, if this is because you think you owe me or whatever?” Billy says. “Or if you change your mind at any point. I need to trust that you’d tell me. Because I don’t want this if you don’t want it, okay?”

Steve kisses him then, forcefully, and Billy tastes that fire he only ever got to glimpse in the other.

Billy pulls away, again. It’s the hardest thing.

“Promise me. Please.”

“I promise you.” Steve says, voice hoarse, warm, eyes warmer. “But you have to promise me the same.”

And Billy can’t imagine how he could ever change his mind, but Steve needs this. Needs the reassurance. So he promises on his lips, in his mouth, his thumbs rubbing it into the silk like skin of Steve’s cheeks. I promise, he swears.

Steve

“Hey, buddy,” Dustin rocks on his feet, thumbs hooked in the straps of his backpack. He broadcasts an equal mix of eagerness and awkwardness as he gives Steve a critical look. “You look - uh, good?” he says with something like suspicion in his little frown.

“Geez, thanks man.” Steve rolls his eyes and ushers him in. The rest of the Party, minus El, follow, lured by free pizza and Steve’s mum's

massive dining table, where they can comfortably spread out their latest campaign. Even Nancy's little shit of a brother appreciates that. He's glad to see that Max managed to join the fun with the excuse of a study session. She gives one of her nods to Steve and makes for the kitchen where Billy is sorting out snacks and drinks.

Jonathan's brother follows, but stops when he sees Billy.

"He won't do anything to you," Steve reassures the kid and Will looks away, cheeks flushing.

"Course he won't, he's got one of those collars on him," Mike snorts from the table, where he's setting up his props with Dustin and Lucas. "He tries anything Steve will zap him."

Steve frowns, but Dustin is quicker to kick Mike's sheen. He must get him good, the way Mike yelps and almost falls off his chair.

"That's a shit thing to say," Dustin points out, "Steve is not like that. And Billy is not that bad. He makes pancakes."

Mike makes an incredulous face, still rubbing at his leg.

"Yeah, man," Sinclair steps in, with a shrug. "Told you, we are okay now. Just - chill, all right?"

"He's still a dick," Mike decides, mouth pinched.

Dustin snorts. "Well, you would know."

"What is that supposed to mean -"

All right, all right, time to step in.

Steve claps his hands. "Hey, shitheads," he barks. "I thought we were setting up the campaign. You want to squabble like toddlers, you can do that elsewhere."

Mutters and groans meet his words, but they settle. Billy, Max and Will join them, balancing sodas and chips between them.

Steve joins the kids at the table and Billy lounges on the couch, grabs

his book from the coffee table, seems to tune them out.

Mike gives him a narrowed eye look.

“Did know he could read,” he mutters.

Steve smirks, a feeling like pride spreading through his chest.

“You should see his GPA score, higher than Nancy.”

Now they are all staring at Billy, even Mike.

Steve lowers his voice, conspiratorially: “I suspect he’s a nerd.”

Billy flips a page and flips him the bird, without even looking up from his book.

“I’m not the one playing dungeons and dragons with a bunch of middle graders, Harrington,” he shoots back, amusement in the curve of his lips and his voice.

“He’s not playing,” Mike pipes up. “We aren’t making that mistake again.”

“Steve’s our intern,” Dustin explains. “He’s here to watch and learn. And provide snacks.”

Billy looks up from his book then and arches an eyebrow at Steve and Steve’s cheeks start burning. “I’m supervising!” He protests.

“Sure, buddy,” Dustin offers, ever agreeable, and pats the chair next to him. “Now come sit next to papa, I’ll show you how it’s done.”

Billy snorts and Steve curses and stomps away from the table. “You know what, I don’t care. Just don’t scratch the table!”

He throws himself on the couch and grabs a well worn copy of *Rolling Stone* and ignores Billy and the shitheads. Well, it’s hard to ignore Billy, he’s sprawled next to him on the couch and his thigh soon presses against Steve, warm and solid.

Steve thumbs at a page, swallows, taps a foot, shuffles away.

“Come here,” Billy rumbles and Steve hesitates, because the kids. But then Billy’s arm is around his shoulders and he gets pulled against his side and it’s so familiar now, so right.

“He’s about to escape from prison,” Billy says, and Steve glimpses at the page, but he’s never been a good reader, letters seem to swim and dance under his eyes so that he jumps from one word to the next and then back and everything jumbles together. But then Billy starts reading to him, voice pitched low and Steve can close his eyes and imagine the sea, the stones of the prison island, can feel the fear and determination, the cold spray of salt water, and that first breath as Dantes swims back to the surface, free.

He startles when the doorbell rings.

“Pizza!” Dusting shouts, and runs for the door, the others in tow, in case they are left with the veggie pizza Steve ordered because he was feeling like a responsible adult for once. Steve gets up and goes to find his wallet to pay the delivery guy. Only Will is still sitting at the table, once more staring at Billy, chewing on his lips, eyes bright, cheeks red.

Steve looks back at Billy, and he’s getting up too, stretching, his t-shirt riding up, showing his navel, the dip of his hips and *oh* . Now Steve knows what Will has been looking at.

Billy gives Steve a questioning look and Steve winks and nods towards Will, then goes to save the delivery guy from Dustin.

Billy can figure it out. He’s the smart one.

Billy

He watches Steve go with a frown. What the hell? Then he sees little Byers, eyes squirrelling away the moment they meet Billy’s.

“Hey, kid, you okay?” Billy says.

The kid is staring at his notebook, scribbles darkening the pages.

He hums, nods, but doesn't look up.

Billy sighs. "Do you want to try that again?"

"It's just," he fiddles with the cuff of his sweatshirt. It's soft looking and frayed at the edges. Like the kid. "Are you and Steve -" He blurts and cringes. "Sorry."

Billy sits down next to the kid, huffs a laugh. "It's complicated."

The kid stares now, determined. "But you like him."

Billy licks his lips. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah, I do."

"Did you always know you liked -" he makes a gesture, but he doesn't need to elaborate. Billy knows what he means. Pretty boys.

"I think so. Better than girls, anyway."

Why is he telling this to the kid, he doesn't know. It's a kind of compulsion. Now that Steve knows, now that Neil is no longer in the picture, now that Billy has a collar around his neck and little to lose, he feels so stupid for having hidden this for so long.

And it seems like the kid needs to hear it, too, going by the way he nods, wide eyed, awed. It's no wonder, in a small town like Hawkins. So he tells him. "Took me a while to figure it out, though. My old man was a dick about it - he -"

Well, he can't say that, it would scar the kid for life. Something must filter on his face anyway, because Will's hand is on his clenched fist, gentle. It's so small and pale, almost fragile. But it's touch is warm and steady, grown up.

"My dad is a dick too. When he was around he would hit mum, and Jonathan. Called me queer."

Billy grimaces, rubs at his mouth. "And are you?"

Will blinks. "I think so," he stays and he's staring at Billy's lips and Billy blinks. *Oh* .

“Kid -“ he sighs.

“Hey,” Steve calls from the door. “You guys want some pizza, you better get your asses in the kitchen.”

Will jumps off the chair and all but runs for the kitchen, Steve watches him go, arms crossed over his chest. He raises an eyebrow at Billy.

“So?”

Billy shakes his head, rubs his neck above the collar, where it feels strangely warm. “Kid got guts,” he says, walking over. “But piss poor taste.”

Steve bumps his shoulder into Billy’s, once he’s within reach.

“Hey, I’ll have you know, my taste is excellent.”

Billy bumps back and heads off to the kitchen. He might be colouring a little.

Steve

It’s good. Watching the kids bicker over the last slice of pepperoni, Billy and Max talking quietly, Steve thinks that maybe, maybe they can get through this. Maybe in four months there will be something left intact of this, maybe he’s not crazy for hoping.

And for once he doesn’t feel alone. For once he feels real.

Steve takes a sip of his coke and thinks that Saturday they will have to do the trip to the Centre again. But tonight, tonight he gets to have this. And later, when the kids will have gone home, he’ll get to have Billy wrapped around him, keeping the monsters and the doubts at bay. If what Steve has to give in return is a piece of his innocence, of his humanity, then that’s worth it. If what they get in return is Billy’s freedom, then Steve would give everything. *Everything* .

He didn’t think he would ever feel this way again. Not after Nancy,

and certainly not for Billy.

Maybe what they have is fucked up. Maybe, when Billy will be free he will want a fresh start, will leave Steve behind. That's all right.

But for now Steve gets to have this, a sense of purpose, someone to protect, someone to give him meaning. That's all he ever needed.

Billy looks up and catches him watching, a question in his eyes.

God, Billy can throw him off balance with a glance. He always could. Steve should have realised then. He swallows, ducks his head, dares another look. Billy's mouth bends into a small knowing smile.

Steve knows the taste of those lips, their texture and how warm they are against his. Steve knows and he marvels.

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGERS (contain spoilers)

- Steve spiralling, with repercussion on his mental health.
- Mentions of eating disorder
- Billy has sex with a OFC - it's all consensual but he does it for the wrong reasons
- Steve performs oral sex on a OMC - again it's consensual but he does it for the wrong reasons
- Dissociation
- Billy and Steve forming a romantic relationship in spite of the power imbalance - though they do their best to put boundaries in place and stick to them. They only kiss at this stage, but the power imbalance is still there - and all their warped reasoning.
- Underage drinking, sexism etc - in like with canon and 80s culture.
- mentions of child abuse, namely Neil putting a cigarette off on Billy's arm
- Tropes! I think I should warn for these, though they lighten the mood somewhat: smart Billy, gay mentor Billy, Will has it bad for him, Steve struggling to

read… :)